

(poetry, fiction, sporty, jest)

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An Old English Poet or minstrel



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Awards

Poetry Award

Summer Songs *by Jim Fox*

Fiction Award

Manhunt *by Reed Benson*

Drama Award

The Vagrant *by Tisha Blankenship-Turner*

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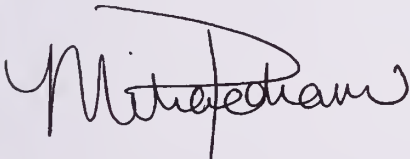
Debbie Seigler

From the Editor

The *SCOP* is a literary magazine, a selective compilation of artistic and academic works written by the Avila University student body. Students from wide-ranging backgrounds and academic disciplines put forth their best work, in hopes of recognition and publication. It is a staff made up of students within the English department that work year-round on the creation of the *SCOP*. In this department as we study literature and hone our writing skills, we realize that working in English is more than just reading books or even studying literature. We are studying life. We are studying culture. We grapple with the big questions, the big ideas. At Avila, we are lucky enough to have a student-teacher ratio which allows us to fully engage with our professors, each other, and our learning process. The ideas, perspectives, and possibilities that are introduced to us may at times seem like a big mess, but as we engage ourselves and each other, it all seems to come together, it all seems to be connected, and we realize that we have gained something worth every bit of that tuition money and more. The pieces in this year's *SCOP* represent all of those big questions and big ideas, the culture here at Avila, and the skill and creativity that these writers have poured into their work.

I would like to thank my brilliant and dedicated editorial staff whose artistic passion is ultimately responsible for this amazing finished work. We owe a big thank you to Artist-in-Residence Stanley E. Banks for his steady guidance and creative and editorial support, Dr. Nancy Cervetti and Dr. Charlene Gould for their academic expertise, Dr. Mary Benson for her critical editorial contributions, and English Chair Dr. Tony Michel for his editorial assistance and also for the inspiration for the *SCOP*'s visual imagery. This visual concept was brought to life by our talented graphic designer Debbie Seigler, who continues to be an amazing artistic asset for the *SCOP*.

The *SCOP* is ultimately a declaration of support and appreciation for our students and their willingness to share their creative and scholarly works.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michel Federman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping initial "M".

SCOP Editor-in-Chief

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non-fiction

Janis Joplin: Musical and Cultural Groundbreaker

Held for three days in June 1967, the Monterey International Pop Festival featured some of the most popular musicians of the generation: the Byrds, the Who, the Mamas and Papas, the Steve Miller Band, and Jimi Hendrix, among many others. The act that stole the show, however, was not one of these big names, but a singer called Janis Joplin, who was until then barely known outside the San Francisco music scene (Rhodes 67). Joplin's first performance was so spectacular that a second one was scheduled for the following evening, when a crew was shooting footage for a film about the festival (Dalton 265). Overnight, Joplin had become a rock superstar; little more than three years later, she was dead. In the course of her short career, Joplin forever changed the place of women in rock music, while simultaneously challenging traditional ideals of femininity, beauty, and fashion.

Janis Lyn Joplin was born on January 19, 1943, the first child of Seth and Dorothy Joplin, who would later have another daughter, Laura, and a son, Michael. The family lived in Port Arthur, Texas, a conservative, Gulf Coast oil refinery town in which "men were men and women were women, and the twain never met except on Saturday night" (Dickerson 53). From an early age, Joplin did not fit in, as she once explained:

Port Arthur people thought I was a beatnik, and they didn't like beatniks, though they'd never seen one and neither had I. I read, I painted, I thought There was nobody like me in Port Arthur. It was lonely, those feelings welling up and nobody to talk to. (qtd. in Lydon 85)

Perhaps as an outlet for her pain, she acquired a love of the blues, especially the music of Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, Odetta, and Bessie Smith, and, by singing along with their recordings, discovered that she had talent as a singer ("Janis Lyn Joplin"). Adolescence only amplified Joplin's social problems: she put on weight and developed acne, and her peers ceaselessly tormented her for these physical imperfections (Rodnitzky 9).

After graduating from high school in 1960, Joplin spent several unsettled years bouncing back and forth between Texas and California. During this time, she made repeated attempts at obtaining a higher education, including stints at the University of Texas at Austin as a fine arts major and at Lamar State College of Technology as a sociology major, but none of these ever panned out ("Janis Lyn Joplin"). Even when

she was enrolled in school, Joplin took gigs singing blues, country, or folk music whenever she could (Lydon 86). Time spent in San Francisco had introduced her to the burgeoning hippie counterculture with its emphasis on drugs, individualism, and free love, and it held more allure for her than did a conventional life. Ultimately, it was an offer to sing for the San Francisco band Big Brother and the Holding Company that lured Joplin away from college for good in 1966 (Lydon 86-87).

The addition of Joplin's powerful, evocative vocals to the blues-rock fusion of Big Brother elevated the band from relative obscurity to prominence within the San Francisco scene (Lydon 87). The performance at the Monterey Pop Festival exposed Big Brother to an even wider audience. Demand for the group grew so large that its album Cheap Thrills sold a million copies within a month of being released in 1968 (Dalton 272). By this time, however, Joplin felt a need to grow beyond the confines of Big Brother, leading her to leave in late 1968 and assemble a new group, the Kozmic Blues Band (Dalton 273). Kozmic Blues lasted only 13 months and released a single album, the moderately successful I Got Dem Ol' Kozmic Blues Again Mama! (Dalton 278-279). Joplin's third band, Full Tilt Boogie, formed in April 1970 and had nearly finished recording its debut album when Joplin suddenly died in October of that year (Dalton 280). The album, Pearl, released posthumously, included one incomplete song, "Buried Alive in the Blues," for which Joplin was to have recorded the vocal the day she died. Pearl also spawned the number one single "Me and Bobby McGee" (Dalton 284).

Before Joplin burst into the nation's consciousness in 1967, females in mainstream music were relegated to one of two categories: "girl" pop singers and singer-songwriters. Members of the former group, whose ranks included solo acts like Connie Francis and Brenda Lee and groups like the Supremes and the Shirelles, were typically teenagers and projected an image of girl-next-door wholesomeness (Hirshey 50). They were prim and polished, with carefully groomed hair and respectable clothing. Though they met traditional standards of beauty, they possessed an innocence that made them cute and cuddly, rather than sexy, as they sang songs about puppy love and marriage (Hirshey 50). Male managers, producers, and songwriters often guided these singers' careers and personae, and perhaps because of the girls' youth, their apparent lack of worldly wiles, or merely the fact that they were female, the public assumed that they required such guidance (Dalton 45-46).

The other role available to female musicians in the early 1960s, singer-songwriter, was at the opposite end of the spectrum. Women such as Joan Baez and Judy Collins used their music to call attention to social and political issues, often accompanying themselves on piano or acoustic guitar (Rodnitzky 8). They demanded

to be taken seriously; one way they attempted to assure this was to distance themselves from their femininity, which was commonly associated with frivolity and lack of intelligence. As a result, they were almost completely non-sexual, more like saints than flesh-and-blood women (Rodnitzky 8).

According to Lisa L. Rhodes, author of Electric Ladyland: Women and Rock Culture, “Joplin rewrote the rulebook for female singers” (1). She acted nothing like the public expected female musicians to act (Rhodes 85): whereas others were meek and compliant or divorced from their sexuality, Joplin was aggressive and sexual (Rodnitzky 8). She made no secret of the fact that she was living for herself, doing what she wanted to do when she wanted to do it, and she wanted to be satisfied in every way possible. Joplin’s motto, which she extended to the many women who had been told to put off personal pleasure, was “get it while you can” (Rodnitzky 12). This approach to sex was considered essentially masculine, and it shocked many people that a female would dare to assume it. While some have argued that Joplin was merely cultivating a “loose” reputation, it is more likely that she was trying to abolish the sexual double standard widely accepted in her time (Rhodes 67). Her admission that she wanted true love, not just physical intimacy, tends to support this view, as does the fact that many of the songs she sang dealt with heartbreak and the pain of infidelity. Thus, unlike her contemporaries, Joplin exhibited the strength and vulnerability that co-exist in all women. This dichotomy is apparent in her voice, which is alternately full-throated and gravelly and soft and tremulous—a radical departure from the saccharine-sweet voices of girl pop singers and the angelic tones of female folk singers.

For girl pop stars, a feminine appearance was inextricably linked with success. Stripped of their make-up, hair spray-encrusted coifs, and coquettish matching outfits, they were fairly unremarkable young women singing what were often silly lyrics. Even female folk singers who tried to distance themselves from identification with their gender avoided behaving in a masculine manner, so their essential femininity was, in actuality, preserved. Joplin, on the other hand, was unconcerned about maintaining the graceful, composed appearance traditionally associated with femininity (Lydon 84). She was willing to look unkempt—contorting her face and body, whipping her hair about until it was a tangled mess, perspiring freely—to convey emotion to her audience (Hirshey 75). Her clothing, too, differed from other female singers’; instead of dressing in elaborate costumes when performing, Joplin looked as if she walked onstage in the clothes she had been wearing all day. Furthermore, her wardrobe included unisex items such as jeans and tee shirts, as well as the usual female attire of dresses and skirts.

In crossing the rigid lines of appearance and behavior separating genders, Joplin was a forerunner to female musicians such as Patti Smith and Chrissie Hynde. Like Joplin, both Smith and Hynde fronted all-male bands and were outspoken and audacious. Smith, whose 1975 debut album Horses is now considered a classic, was fond of wearing white shirts, black pants, skinny black ties, and suspenders—the type of clothing generally associated with masculinity. Her unshaven underarms further added to an image that was, as author Gerri Hirshey writes, “almost girl-dismissive” (111). Chrissie Hynde, the founder, lead singer, and rhythm guitarist of the Pretenders, also adopted a uniform in which any male rock musician would likely feel at home: pants, tee shirts, and black leather (Hirshey 114).

Another thing distinguishing Joplin from her contemporaries was that she invented herself (Dalton 46). There was no male manager or producer behind the scenes telling her how she should look and act; Joplin alone created her public persona, which was no different from her real personality. By refusing to change who she was to suit others, she hoped to serve as a model for young people, saying, “That’s what I hope I mean to those kids out there. After they see me ... maybe they’ll have second thoughts—that they can be themselves and win” (qtd. in Lydon 85).

Joplin’s personality was so powerful that it came across clearly in her voice, and every song she sang became uniquely hers, even if someone else had composed or performed it originally (Dalton 46). In fact, the majority of her trademark songs were written by others, including “Piece of My Heart,” “Ball and Chain,” “Cry Baby,” “Try (Just a Little Bit Harder),” “Summertime,” and “Me and Bobby McGee.” Besides being Joplin’s only number-one single, “Me and Bobby McGee” marked another milestone in the history of rock music: Kris Kristofferson wrote it to be sung by a man, and Joplin role-reversed the lyrics in her rendition. Though female folk singers routinely role-reversed lyrics, Joplin was the first female rock singer to do so (Rodnitzky 12). The results were spectacular. As biographer David Dalton noted, Joplin sang songs so passionately that “few singers have even attempted them since” (46).

It is sometimes difficult to realize how innovative a person is while he or she is still living: only with the aid of hindsight is his or her contribution fully apparent. This was the case with Joplin. Though she achieved worldwide fame during her lifetime, she has been raised to iconic status since her death. In 1995, twenty-five years after she died, Joplin was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, an honor awarded to just a handful of performers each year (“Inductees”). Then, in 2005, Joplin received a Lifetime Achievement Award from The Recording Academy’s National Trustees. Announcing the award via press release, the Trustees said, “Joplin redefined the role of

women in rock with her assertive, sexual persona and electrifying on-stage presence” (“Press Room”).

Joplin’s revolutionary effect is most obvious in the musical realm, but her influence was much more far-reaching, affecting American culture at large. One example of this effect is the pivotal role she played in bringing the blues to a white audience. Blues, developed in the southern United States by former slaves following the Civil War, remained a genre made up almost entirely of black artists well into the twentieth century (“blues”). By the 1950s and 60s, racial segregation had sunk so deeply into American society that there were even white radio stations and black radio stations; therefore, many whites never heard the blues until white singers began covering black artists’ songs (Escovar). Joplin, unlike some white performers, openly credited her black influences, leading her young white listeners to discover a whole new world of music. Blues songs, with their tales of infidelity, lost love, and loneliness (“blues”), were easy to identify with—these subjects are common to all races and social classes. In her own songs, “[Joplin] adapted the black blues tradition to the needs of an affluent but culturally rootless youth culture,” says Jerry Rodnitzky, author of “Janis Joplin: The Hippie Blues Singer as Feminist Heroine” (14), thus providing young people with a necessary link to something larger than themselves. At the same time, however, the rock and roll element of electric guitars, feedback, and distortion that she and her various bands injected into conventional blues songs created something entirely new: Joplin was not recreating the blues but reinventing it (Dalton 34).

Joplin’s musical innovations should have given journalists and critics plenty to write about, but most preferred to focus on her physical appearance (Rhodes 66). This is hardly surprising, given that female singers were valued just as much for how they looked as for how they sounded. Female performers, no matter what their genre, were expected to be “pretty,” with delicate features, sculptured cheekbones, and smooth skin. Even Jefferson Airplane singer Grace Slick, the other female star of the San Francisco hippie scene, had been a model before turning to music (Rodnitzky 12). Joplin, however, did not fit the mold. Her features were somewhat coarse, and her complexion was marred by acne; virtually every piece written about Joplin makes mention of her being unattractive.

Seen under ordinary circumstances, Joplin’s features may have been plain, but even the most superficial observer had to admit how beautiful she was when she sang (Dickerson 54). This ability for transformation “taught America that beauty didn’t have to be a constant, it could ebb and flow and surprise you by being there one minute and not the next,” according to rock journalist Lillian Roxon (qtd. in Rodnitzky 11).

Joplin refused to change her appearance to comply with societal norms just as she declined to compromise her personality to please others. Though the prevailing style at the time was for women to keep their hair under rigid control through the use of straighteners, dyes, and hair sprays, Joplin allowed her locks to remain in their natural state: brown, wavy, and somewhat unruly (Rodnitzky 10). In so doing, she sent a powerful message that women should not have to alter themselves to be considered beautiful but should be appreciated just as they were. Many young women adopted this new standard of beauty: one music critic wrote that she stopped straightening her hair because of Joplin (Rhodes 33).

Joplin's popularization of naturalistic hairstyles was one part of what Rodnitzky called her "most universal influence" (10). The other part was her dissemination of San Francisco hippie-style clothing across the country (Rodnitzky 10). During that era, most women were accustomed to squeezing themselves into uncomfortable panty girdles and dresses in order to compete with waifish models like the infamous Twiggy. Joplin, not one to accept any sort of restriction, encouraged women to throw away their girdles and their bras, as well (Rhodes 86). As an alternative, she promoted garments that were loose and naturalistic, flamboyant and unique, and that looked like they had come from a thrift shop rather than a catwalk (Rhodes 32). Joplin's down-to-earth taste and her realistic figure made her a perfect fashion role model for the millions of women tired of high-priced, impractical designer clothes and the impossibly thin models who wore them (Rhodes 86). Naturalistic styles of clothing were diverse enough to flatter a variety of body types, imparting confidence to women who had always felt that their bodies were unattractive (Rodnitzky 11). Thus, says Roxon, Joplin "liberated more American women than a hundred books" (qtd. in Rodnitzky 11).

Janis Joplin was not only a groundbreaking female rock vocalist; she was a cultural figure who altered the way Americans thought about femininity, beauty, and fashion. Unfortunately, Joplin died on October 4, 1970, so she was unable to witness the long-lasting effects of her career. The fact that an overdose of heroin, a drug to which she was addicted, killed her has sometimes been used to disparage Joplin's memory, but her death should not be allowed to overshadow the legacy she left behind. Her influence on the role of women in music cannot be overestimated. Singer Rosanne Cash put it best when she wrote, "Without Janis Joplin, there would be no Melissa Etheridge. Without Janis, there would be no Chrissie Hynde, no Gwen Stefani. There would be no one" (136). What is more, for her contributions to women's liberation, all females owe Joplin a debt of gratitude.

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Moving Up in the World: The Economics of Class and Marriage in Charles Dickens' Our Mutual Friend

"A man may do anything lawful, for money" (Dickens 891), says an esteemed member of high society in Charles Dickens' 1864 novel Our Mutual Friend. This short statement concisely summarizes what many believed in the nineteenth century: that money was the source for all security and happiness. Thus, any schemes to obtain or search for money were condoned by society. In this paper I will review some historical and legal background of the middle of the nineteenth century in order to give some context for how Dickens challenged the dominant ideology of marriage in his last completed novel. I will limit this paper to examining four marriages from different class stations and explain Dickens' social commentary through each one. Through his deconstructions of British society, Dickens pushed for reform, and he reached a large and diverse group of people through the genre he chose.

The middle and latter half of the nineteenth century found Britain in a polarized state. The Industrial Revolution had forever changed the landscape, and society felt its repercussions. The Industrial Revolution left some significantly wealthier, but it also segregated the population into even stricter class boundaries. It brought a divide between skilled and unskilled workers, which soon became a social and psychological segregation (Bédarida 60).

During this time British society was divided into three major classes. The first was elite high society into which, "It was the ambition of many successful industrialists or merchants to acquire landed status and to mix with the country gentry on equal terms" (Hart 18). While the system of nobility and titled families still remained in place, a new aristocracy arose. This newly found gentry came from industry where there was a rush toward the world of money and merit (Bédarida 49). This new group mixed with the old nobility, married daughters into it, and took part in the life of "society." The accepted norms of the time stipulated that those who were wealthy were supposed to be noticeably extravagant and have as little to do with the lower classes as possible.

The second class was the middle class which consisted of persons such as shop owners and factory owners. This middle part of society did their best to distinguish themselves from the low society as much as possible. This came through education, religion, and manners. The lowest part of society was the working class,

which ranged from servants and laborers to beggars. The population of cities had grown dramatically in the nineteenth century. During Dickens' day thousands of cheaply made houses were built for the swelling population of the cities. The housing tenements soon became overcrowded and disease-ridden slums.

Due to the lack of education and hard living conditions, the rest of society viewed the working classes as uncouth, violent, and barbaric. This only added to the disparity between the classes and increased the difficulty for the lower classes to move up in the world or escape the sphere where they found themselves. Reforms to improve conditions came in the middle and late nineteenth century, but they were long fought. Many of the reforms were not completely enacted until the beginning of the twentieth century (Hart 81).

Working women were divided into three classes: some were factory workers, others were domestic servants, and still others worked from home usually in sewing. The Industrial Revolution undermined some of the traditional ideas about women, because they became a larger number of workers in industry and factories (Bédarida 120-121). Yet, ingrained ideas are not dislodged easily. Coverture still remained firmly in place, and women were still restricted from the public sphere. In pre-industrial Britain, the family was often seen as a unit of production; but by the middle of the nineteenth century, women became limited to the domestic sphere "as sex role differentiation became greater" (Wright 235). In this divided culture, marriage was often considered for social and economic reasons, because women had few choices (Richards 100). Marriage was viewed as a matter of family concern, where one had to give thought to financial and social matters.

Marriage brought a woman an elevation in status and was, therefore, considered an elevation in society. Phillipa Levine describes how "family expectation and even self-esteem competed with the public assessment of women on the basis of their marital status" (Levine 150). Those who did not marry were labeled spinsters and treated as outsiders to society (Levine 151). Any marriage could be seen as better than being a surplus woman who would lead a lonely, outcast life of possible poverty with none of the social or material securities of a married existence. The pressures on women to marry were great and often hard to resist.

The common view was that the most prudent thing a single woman could do was to marry the man who could provide the best for her materially. Women could struggle to receive a fair wage and, if they belonged to the upper class, they were not supposed to work at all. Those of the lowest classes also found it difficult to obtain lucrative and respectable employment (Shanley 102). Marrying and-even better than

that-marrying up in the world financially were commonly seen as the means to create a respectable and meaningful life.

One reformer in this time was Charles Dickens. He contributed to change through the social commentary in his novels, and Our Mutual Friend was no exception. Through his depictions and characterizations of marriage in the novel, Dickens challenged the previous ideology of marriage and promoted a new standard. This novel was shocking to many in his original audience largely due to his social commentary.

The first couple I will discuss is Alfred and Sophronia Lammle who represent one of the more intriguing couples of the novel, even if they embody the more typical view of marriage when Our Mutual Friend was published. Through their relationship, Dickens parodies a supposedly ideal marriage made in relation to class and for the purpose of money. By exploring the consequences of marrying for money, Dickens encourages his readers to rethink society's preconceived ideas. The Lammle's romance follows the set norms and ideology of nineteenth-century Britain, as both Alfred and Sophronia view marriage as a purely economic contract used to increase their status in society. To them romance is viewed merely as a game to beguile someone of better status than oneself into the legally binding contract of marriage. Alfred is described as a wealthy owner of property, as is Sophronia; both seem well-bred and have been introduced in high society. By all appearances they create an ideal couple. Thus, their nuptials are met with the favor and delight of high society; they embody a supposedly prudent way a marriage should be handled, since all monetary and class boundaries are kept in their former and proper places.

Alfred and Sophronia's honeymoon is short-lived when they discover that each has betrayed the other and inflated their personal assets. Sophronia angrily turns to her new husband and demands bluntly:

"you are a man of property?"

"No."

"Then you married me on false pretences?"

"So be it. Next comes what you mean to say.' Do you mean to say you are a woman of property?"

"No."

"Then you married me under false pretences." (169)

Dickens humorously portrays the common, yet sad, story of marriages based solely on monetary investment. The practical and proper view of marriage becomes a sham where two people are forever joined in a bond when they do not love or trust each

other, let alone like one another. Instead of declarations of love, shortly after their marriage, Sophronia bitterly denigrates Alfred by asking:

"Do you pretend to believe," Mrs Lammle resumes, sternly, "when you talk of my marrying you for worldly advantages, that it was within the bounds of reasonable probability that I would have married you for yourself?"

"Again there are two sides to the question, Mrs Lammle. What do you pretend to believe?"

"So you first deceive me and then insult me!" cries the lady, with a heaving bosom.

"Not at all. I have originated nothing. The double-edged question was yours" (171).

Both of them were merely playing games to move up in the world. Sophronia's accusations against Alfred for using her as a pawn also attack herself, because the moment she condemns his actions, she condemns her own.

What makes this particular union even more interesting is how Sophronia and Alfred turn away from their seething anger at each other and join to become a cohesive team. They fail miserably in achieving their goals of more money through their marriage, and yet they discover that they both have a talent for deception as they successfully duped not only society but also another expert fraud. They declare revenge on high society whom they blame for setting up the situations in which they find themselves. To cover their guilt and shame, they decide that the shrewdest move is to continue the charade they began. Alfred convinces his dear and doting wife to work with him to further "any scheme that will bring us money" (173). Admitting their situation to others would have been socially disastrous and would have severely limited any further chance they had of moving up in the world. Alfred and Sophronia never give a thought to relinquishing their goals or giving up the ideals of society.

In the course of the novel, Alfred reveals a continually deeper sense of greed; his all-consuming need for money even turns violent when he beats Fascination Fledgby nearly senseless for cheating him. Sophronia, on the other hand, shows a couple of moments of remorse for the deceitful life she has built for herself. This can be seen after she maliciously wins her way into the good graces of a wealthy heiress with the plan to marry the girl off to a vicious money hunter. When her plans fail, Sophronia surprisingly does not show anger or frustration. On the contrary, she expresses relief that at least this girl will be spared the kind of marriage in which Sophronia finds herself.

Alfred mocks and threatens her for this, and Dickens makes it clear that Sophronia now has little choice. She does not have the money to obtain a divorce, since during the mid-nineteenth century a divorce had to be granted by an act of parliament. Furthermore, in the eyes of the law she does not have just cause to leave her increasingly violent husband, since she had no proof of abuse. It was also rare for a woman to receive a divorce at this time, even with the reforms that were being introduced in the middle of the century. Though the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 made it easier to obtain a divorce, which previously was nearly impossible, it stipulated that divorce could only be granted on the terms of adultery. Furthermore, the wife not only had to prove adultery but also another serious provocation like abandonment or rape (Lord 16-17).

The desire for money has turned Sophronia's life into a nightmare void of sympathetic feelings from her husband or her friends. However, in my opinion, she soon sinks again, when in the same scene as her moment of compassion, she coldly declares she will leave all sentiment behind and continue to do anything necessary to achieve her initial goals of wealth and status. This is the only way she sees to survive in a superficial world with a malicious husband.

Thus, Dickens portrays the Lammles as having been destroyed by their priority of money over character. Through their many misadventures and plots, both those failed and successful, he shows that they will never be satisfied. Their life will continue on its destructive path with little hope for redemption. The last appearance of the Lammles is of them strolling down the street:

It might have been fanciful to suppose that under their outer bearing there was something of the shamed air of two cheats who were linked together by concealed handcuffs; but, not so, to suppose that they were weary of one another, of themselves, and of all this world (717).

The handcuffs can be taken not only as an unwilling binding to each other personally, but also of their bondage to the shallowness of high society and their inability to remove themselves from the institution of a practical marriage. The ideal of money as the only worthwhile objective destroys Alfred and Sophronia and trap them in an unhappy marriage and in their own minds.

The Lammles are portrayed with humor and sympathy as Dickens suggests their just punishment for preying on anyone with money is the fact that they must live with each other. Dickens challenges the dominant ideology of marriage through their story by parodying the ideals of a proper and decent marriage. By showing the emptiness of marriage made purely as a monetary contract, he begins to tailor his

audience to see the problems with the current system and to wonder whether couples with whom they may be acquainted might turn out to be “Alfreds” and “Sophronias” themselves. Now that Dickens has within the first ten chapters of the book deconstructed the British view of a suitable marriage, he moves on to inserting ideas of how a better idea of marriage can be constructed.

Perhaps one of the most memorable couples in this book is Mr. and Mrs. Wilfur. She runs her husband with an iron hand of guilt as much as possible, and he in turn endeavors to spend as little time as possible in her stern company. Dickens describes Mr. Wilfur as shy but hardworking at his job as a poor clerk. His wife, Mrs. Wilfur, is domineering and somewhat spiteful. Even with their polar personalities, the main source of conflict in the Wilfur’s marriage is money – or the lack of it.

Even with all of their complaints of poverty, the Wilfurs are not miserably poor. On the contrary, they inhabit a respectable situation in society. They own a house, possess a steady income, and do not want for any necessity. They are part of the growing middle class or nineteenth-century England. Dickens’ point when describing this family is not that they are poor; rather they believe they are poor, and “poverty has become their state of mind” (Dvorak 144). The Wilfurs believe to be truly respectable they must possess as much money as the upper crust of society. What Mr. and especially Mrs. Wilfur do not realize is that the world created by high society is a world of veneers and outward appearances containing no more happiness than they possess. Nonetheless, a day does not go by without money coming up in the conversation. This parallels how money had become the standard of respectability and rank when this novel was published.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Wilfur married each other for affection and because the other was a decent, semi-respectable catch. Yet, when life does not turn out to be perfect they did not experience marital bliss, the charms of money and wealth began to creep in as the ideal modes of happiness. Soon all Mrs. Wilfur can think about is how much better her life would be, her children would behave, and she would be admired if she had married a wealthy man. Mr. Wilfur, on the other hand, realizes that he will never be able to gain the dream of being wealthy. No matter how hard he works, he can never move out of his class into a better one. So he simply avoids his wife as much as possible and plugs along at his job in a futile attempt to give her what she wants, even if he knows he can never achieve it.

Mrs. Wilfur, in order to save her children from an unhappy life, insists that they marry money. Her goal is to move up in the world, and if she has to do that through her last two unmarried daughters, she will. She tells them what her parents told her,

"Never, never, never marry a little man!" (516). During her and Mr. Wilfur's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary dinner, she solemnly comments to her husband, "My face might be a martyrdom, but what would that import, or who should know it if I smiled?" (516). On this anniversary, instead of launching into a tale of why she fell in love with her husband, she tells her daughters a tale of woe:

Within a month," said Mrs Wilfur, deepening her voice, as if she were relating a terrible ghost story, "within a month, I first saw R.W. my husband. Within a year, I married him. It is natural for the mind to recall these dark coincidences on the present day. (517).

The horror of the story for Mrs. Wilfur is that she has been forever bonded to a man who is not part of the upper class, and therefore her life has been a tragedy. Upward mobility is prized, yet it is not always achievable. Dickens is saying that when upward social mobility stagnates, that does not signify all meaningful life has ended.

When one of their daughters gets married to a respectable but hardly wealthy man, Mrs. Wilfur informs her husband of the runaway match:

with a lofty air of never having had the least copartnership in that young lady: of whom she now made reproachful mention as an article of luxury which her husband had set up entirely on his own account, and in direct opposition to her advice: '-your daughter Bella has bestowed herself upon a Mendicant. (739).

When Mr. Wilfur replies that the new son-in-law doesn't quite fall under the category of a mendicant, Mrs. Wilfur replies that since he is not a gentleman of landed property, he is indeed a beggar, and consequently they will have a miserable existence. Mr. Wilfur, who already knew of the elopement, promptly falls asleep during her sermon.

Dickens portrays most of the scenes with the Wilfurs humorously, but that does not make their situation desirable. Dickens' point is that, though the Wilfurs cannot claim to belong to the upper crust of society, the greed and superficial elements of that realm have infected the middle class as well. I believe Dickens' intention in his portrayal of the Wilfurs is that satisfaction can remain just beyond reach, no matter what level of society one inhabits. A healthy marriage, therefore, does not come into existence merely because a couple does not marry for money or status. A desirable match also comes from the individual characters and the personalities of the husband and wife.

Mrs. Wilfur constantly reminds her husband how much better off she would have been if she had married for money. As a woman, Mrs. Wilfur had only one real

option to increase her status, and that option was marriage. Her choice dissatisfied her; thus Dickens is saying that a marriage is closely related to the issues of wealth and class. Dickens portrays the Wilfur's marriage as an unhealthy environment for the married couple and, more importantly, for the Wilfur children. This home life is a daily example to their daughter, Bella, what her life would be like if she did not marry for money. When Mr. Wilfur begins to chastise Bella for becoming mercenary she interrupts saying, "'Pa, tell me. Did you marry money?'" He replies, "'You know I didn't, my dear'" (376). She then implies that he does not have a happy or contented marriage. Therefore, her odds of marital happiness must be just as great if not better if she marries for money. If marital bliss is a fiction, then, the best she can do for herself is to have the consolation of the best status of wealth she can marry into. Mr. Wilfur has nothing to say to Bella's comment, because he knows he has a less than desirable home life.

After being raised in this charming home and pressured to marry a man she has never met, it is not surprising that Bella, though charming, becomes mercenary. The story of Bella Wilfur and John Harmon/Rokesmith is a central plot to the novel. To inherit his fortune, John must marry Bella, a girl he has never even seen. His life takes a twist when John is beaten, robbed, and left for dead. His attacker is then robbed and murdered by other criminals, but since this attacker had John's personal papers, it is published that John Harmon is murdered. John, depressed and unsure about marrying a stranger, does not come forward. Instead, he creates a new identity in John Rokesmith, a quiet secretary who works for the old servants Mr. and Mrs. Buffin, who, through his supposed death, inherit his fortune. They take in Bella as a ward and, consequently John, nearly invisible due to his lowered rank, gets an up-close look at his "almost" wife and the repercussions of wealth.

Before John is even supposedly murdered, speculators start grappling for a piece of the fortune. As Rokesmith, John is suddenly free from the games and intrigues of high society. Thus, "the dead/alive John Harmon achieves a dynamic freedom through his 'death' and social declassification. He removes himself from the patrilinear imperatives of his father's 'will'; he also temporarily frees himself from the capitalist economy" (Surridge 267). To survive the class system and the jostling for wealth and position, John removes himself from society as best he can. Dickens makes it clear that few can simply remove themselves from their station and society. Yet, the desperate measures John feels forced to take speak to the confines society creates by its reliance on money as the most valuable standard.

Soon, John has a new struggle when he falls deeply in love with Bella, since [he] lovers] cannot bring himself to come to life in order to claim his inheritance “and with it sordidly to buy a beautiful creature whom I love” (429). He refuses to force her to marry him by becoming John Harmon once again. John remarks bitterly to himself that Bella “would as soon love me for my own sake, as she would love the beggar at the corner. What use for the money, and how worthy of its old misuses!” (429). This is proved correct when Bella discovers his affection, and biting rejects his proclamations of devotion. She has one chance to move up in society, and she will not waste it on a mere secretary.

While John struggles with being dead or alive, Bella has internal struggles of her own. The start of the novel shows a torn Bella, a girl who despises being poor and is allured to the charms that money and status can bring her; but she also dreads marrying a man who only wishes to purchase her “as a Sultan buys a slave” (429). After moving in with the Buffins, she joyfully enters high society but she realizes that the money she is spending is not her own; rather, it is as a guest in the Buffin’s house that she obtains her elevated status.

As a woman, Bella has few choices as to how she can maintain herself; so she decides to look about society for “money to captivate” (375), or in other words the richest man she can allure with her feminine charms. She tells her father, “I have made up my mind that I must have money, Pa. I feel that I can’t beg it, borrow it, or steal it; and so I have resolved that I must marry it” (375). Bella openly admits to her father in several scenes that she is growing increasingly mercenary; she begins to put off suitors that she deems too low in society and in monetary resources.

In the eyes of society and the cultural norms of the time, Bella is making good progress in achieving an ideal life. Since she is a woman, she should look for a man who can provide for her financially. Her plans begin to waver, though, when she sees her patron Mr. Buffin becoming increasingly miserly and suspicious of people; Bella distances herself from society’s ideal by the truth of what she sees. She confesses to her father:

if ever a good man were ruined by good fortune, it is my benefactor...I see this, and hate this, and dread this, and don’t know but that money might make a much worse change in me. And yet I have money always in my thoughts and my desires; and the whole life I place before myself is money, money, money and what money can make of life! (521)

The education of Bella continues as she sees Mr. Buffin sink ethically lower. She witnesses the moral bankruptcy caused by the values of status and wealth that society and her family perpetuate. Through Mr. Buffin's ill treatment of his secretary, she begins to see Rokesmith as a person. Soon a friendship between them emerges. The climax of Bella's journey comes when she finally renounces her ideals of a high society life, after hearing those same ideals mirrored in Mr. Buffin's angry actions and speeches. Bella stands up for the mistreated Rokesmith, and cries to Mr. Buffin, "Your money has changed you to marble" (664).

Through Bella's journey, Dickens portrays what love should really be. She learns "the only kind of love for a man that is really meaningful is the kind given totally freely with no expectation of reward" (Dvorak 153). Soon Bella and John—still posing as Rokesmith—elope, an act which high society vigorously condemns. They are cut off from society, and John must look for new employment. Yet, Dickens portrays this ostracizing as glorious freedom for the couple, who can now learn to appreciate and respect people based on their humanity not their bank accounts. Even with being socially ostracized and reverting to a lower status, neither of them regrets their choices. Dickens takes Bella through a Cinderella story by raising her status, but then reverses her status by her marriage. Elevation to high society brought Bella face-to-face with avarice; her ideal world turned into a prison inhabited by misers. Dickens portrays the marriage games of high society with Bella's schemes; but, unlike Sophronia Lammle, Bella decides to save her moral integrity and, through this, gains a marriage based on love, respect, and honor instead of one based on avarice, deceit, and material gain. Only once Bella "recognizes that the true source of value is the human spirit itself does she recapture the gold she has lost" (Miller 327). She gains her self-respect back, and in turn gives her husband John back the riches he lost in having someone to love and to reciprocate that love.

Through John and Bella's stories, Dickens positively portrays a relationship that is made not for monetary gain; in fact, both characters turn their backs on an enormous fortune. The money itself is not the source of the problem; instead it is the evils of greed, the lack of trust, and the emptiness of high society that accompany the money which these two wish to escape. Through their story, Dickens explains that not all marriage has to end in the bitterness of the Wilfurs or the deceitfulness of the Lammles.

The final marriage I will analyze is that Lizzie Hexam and Eugene Wrayburn. After parodying the wrong ways to get married and less than desirable reasons why to get married, Dickens portrays Lizzie and Eugene's marriage as personifying the

ideal means and motivations for marriage. The uniqueness about Lizzie and Eugene's relationship is that it is entirely atypical of the norm in nineteenth-century British society. Current readers may see their story as somewhat predictable; however it was quite revolutionary when Dickens wrote it. Though their plot threatens, in the beginning, to be a somewhat cliché saga of the seduction of a virtuous yet penniless young woman by a wealthy gentleman who is captivated by her beauty and charm, it is actually a striking tale of moral character and growth.

The insolvable problem for Eugene is that he loves a girl, Lizzie, who is significantly below him in status. It is surprising that they even met, let alone that they become acquaintances and then friends. She is the daughter of a waterman who gains his living by robbing corpses. The only dignity her father claims is that he at least only steals money from those who are already dead, rather than kill them first. Consequently, Lizzie grew up in extreme poverty and in a station of life where there was little hope of improvement. Eugene, on the other hand, is the son of a gentleman; he is a lawyer, and a member of high society. Eugene, though he is a barrister, prefers not to work for a living as he has plenty of family money to be able to live well without having to take the trouble of actually working and being productive.

Eugene shows contempt for the superficial games of high society, yet he refuses to distance himself from the lifestyle of the wealthy. He is indolent and without inspiration. Even though he despises the absurdities of high society, it is unthinkable that Eugene would ever condescend to even think of marrying someone whom others of his class would not think worthy of notice. When this book was written, many gentlemen never would have even acknowledged someone of Lizzie's class as a person, let alone show them understanding or compassion.

Eugene's dilemma is that he is torn between his indolence and his distrust of high society. William Palmer describes it this way: "Wrayburn does not understand himself at all and refuses to make any effort toward changing that situation" (492). Near the beginning of the novel Eugene shows a surprising sympathetic heart toward the misfortunate, and this sympathy, combined with his fascination with Lizzie, allows him to cross class barriers to get to know Lizzie and her crippled friend Jenny Wren. He provides them with the start of an education, which is a gift both girls cherish most, since it is a door for them to experience more of the world than they had ever known.

Even as Eugene and Lizzie grow in their tentative friendship, Eugene often talks down to her and patronizes her. This is not because Eugene does not respect Lizzie; rather, he is attempting to provide an excuse to himself for getting to know her. This

excuse is that of didactic purposes, yet Lizzie has the greater influence on him morally. Many characters in the novel witness the growing relationship between Lizzie and Eugene with alarm, including Lizzie's friend Jenny, Lizzie's brother, her would-be suitor Bradley Headstone, and Eugene's friend Mortimer Lightwood.

Though Eugene feels his growing attachment for Lizzie, his morals will not allow him to seduce her to become his mistress, a solution that society would understand. In the late nineteenth-century, all women of the lower classes were considered fair game for gentleman (Palmer 493). Eugene cannot possibly marry her due to society's rules and demands, yet he cannot reduce her by merely using her and shaming her good name. Eugene argues with himself saying, "You wouldn't marry for some money and some station, because you were frightfully likely to become bored, marrying for no money and no station?" (765) The only other option he sees is to leave her alone as she pleads him to. However, he loves her and does not want to be separated from her. With nothing to do other than dwell on her, he becomes more in love with her rather than less.

With the character of Lizzie, Dickens shows that the lower classes are not devoid of true feeling and morality. Though she has been raised around squalor and ignorance, she refuses to lower her ethical standards. She refuses to marry Bradley Headstone even though he offered her a respectable position in life, one that is much higher than the position she currently inhabits, because not only does she not love him, she is afraid of him physically. She also realizes that a marriage with him would not bring her lasting happiness; instead it would only trap her in a dangerous situation. This is extraordinary conduct for one in her position. She is on her own to support herself and has no male protector to provide a nominal means of shelter in her violent world. Dickens in some ways is offering hope through his portrayal of Lizzie that not all women without options have to end up in a forced marriage of convenience or as a prostitute.

Lizzie also consistently strives against the assumed idea that she will become Eugene's mistress. She knows as a gentleman he should never consider treating her as an equal by marrying her. She describes their relationship as "so endless, so hopeless" (763). When she realizes her growing attachment to him and his for her, she does what she considers the only honorable thing. She runs away, hiding herself from him. She does this not for herself, but for him, knowing that his increasing affection for herself is putting them in an impossible situation. He will either continue to pursue her and eventually disgrace her, or he will ruin his reputation and future prospects by marrying her. Entrenched in a society that cherishes money, she does not want to see the man she loves jeopardize his position in the world. When he finds her, she pleads:

Think of me, as belonging to another station, and quite cut off from you in honour. Remember that I have no protector near me, unless I have one in your noble heart. Respect my good name. If you feel towards me, in one particular, as you might if I was a lady, give me the full claims of a lady upon your generous behaviour. I am removed from you and your family by being a working girl. How true a gentleman to be as considerate of me as if I was removed by being a Queen! (761)

Eugene sees himself in a crisis, but I believe that Dickens portrays him as someone who has already conquered his largest difficulty. By refusing to seduce Lizzie, he has realized her right to humanity and, therefore, closed the fissures between the classes. Eugene learns to lose any regard for what society may think of him. He decides to marry her. However, it takes Eugene's near death for Lizzie to accept his offer. She must first get over the perceived separation of class in her own mind. Once she realizes he has changed, "Lizzie can accept and grow with him as a moral equal, which represents then her realizations that class lines are false" (Dvorak 160). They marry in a small ceremony with only a few close friends around. Their story is not over with their marriage; on the contrary, both must deal with being ostracized by society. Yet, as happens with John and Bella, Eugene and Lizzie learn that the crossing of class divisions brings more freedom and comfort than buying into the predominant ideas of the mid-nineteenth century.

Dickens ends his last novel with a final jab at society's view of class. When high society is disparaging Eugene and Lizzie's marriage, the timid character of Twemlow stifles them by saying, "if such feeling on the part of this gentleman, induced this gentleman to marry this lady, I think he is the greater gentleman for the action, and makes her the greater lady" (891). Dickens thus ends his novel by blatantly stating that whether society in general approves, each individual must strive to grow morally and overcome the false barriers of class and idols of money.

This book is about a whole society which has forgotten that money is attributing value to a valueless matter. The coins, notes, and numbers in themselves are worth nothing, unless they are given a designated worth. What society has done is taken money and class as the ultimate value in itself, and a measurement for all other values and morals. Thus, through his descriptions of marriage, Dickens turns the current system of the 1860s on its head by revealing the misplaced logic which had warped individuals through marriage and family. He explains that though the present value systems are prevalent, that does not mean they can not change, and that "men have the power to make their physical world, to shape it for good or for ill, according to the

way in which they define and use money" (Dvorak 167). As exemplified in the marriage of the Wilfurs and in the education of Bella and John, money can cause more problems than answers. This lesson transcends Dickens' original audience and speaks across time and cultures.

In many ways this novel is the culmination of the false value system which the society had built itself upon (Sanders 165). This novel challenges the ideals of society and demonstrates the class and gender prisons that Dickens saw restricting Great Britain in the late nineteenth century. Humans were caught within a society in transition; the old aristocracy was being challenged, but only by an even stricter class system. Women were still trapped into a domestic sphere where there were few choices and no political voice. Through this last novel, Dickens challenges his readers not only to reevaluate the present cultural norms but also to create a new system that transcends the present value systems. Thus, "what Dickens does demonstrate is that men can make their own world, they can be in a position to make choices, if they see, physically and morally, what is happening to them and their society as they experience socio-economic change" (Dvorak 127). In Lizzie and Eugene's marriage Dickens relates how to see past the boundaries of class, to see the individual people and stories that inhabit those positions. This lesson also speaks to present audiences as prejudice is far from removed from societies today.

In both the marriages of Lizzie and Bella, Dickens purposefully portrays them as rational and intelligent humans. Through the women he portrays, especially Sophronia and Bella, Dickens shows how they are limited by the boundaries society places on them, not only because of their class but more importantly because of their gender. They have no political voice and few options for ensuring their futures. By revealing the inherent wrongs of limiting half of a society because they are women, Dickens challenges the discriminatory views of women that had pervaded in England for centuries; and he helps spur changes for the status of women.

Marriage is a central element of society as it is a basis for families. By commenting on the wrong motivations for marriage, Dickens strives to change how society functions. One could argue that merely deconstructing marriage would not have a lasting impact upon a society, but this argument should take into account that marriage is a foundation for any society. It can be a nuclear unit of how a civilization operates. By creating a means for a healthy and successful core, a culture can build upon this to affect many other aspects of society. A strong base is an origin for a society. Dickens' comments on marriage are significant, because very few societies are free from greed, avarice, and the supposed charms of a higher status. Life can be

hard, and every life will probably be scarred by many things. So it is important not to walk willingly into situations or accept ideologies that will eventually bring even more pain to life. Through this novel and many others, Dickens joined many other reformers to help change the perspective of his society. At the point it was published, Dickens had gained great popularity and respect; therefore, he used this to shake up the society that both praised his work and struggled with dealing with the new ideals partially brought about by the Industrial Revolution.

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The Reverend

Sitting at a computer in a Superman t-shirt, playing massive multi-player online role-playing games, Spencer Cassidy at first appears to be a stereotypical gamer. He has read almost all the rulebooks for Dungeons & Dragons, as well as numerous other tabletop games. He collects Superman comic books, and he is not getting laid. But Spencer is anything but typical. Most gamers are obsessed with Japanese comic books, called Manga, and their counterpart television series, called anime. Spencer likes neither. At twenty-one years of age, he has not lost the vivid imagination of a young child. Because of this, our circle of mutual friends knows Spencer by many names. We have referred to him as Halo, (it has nothing to do with the video game), Haliel, and the Reverend Halo Testament. Spence created each of these personas in conjunction with a world he created. He stands at about five-foot-five or -six and in many ways looks like a teddy bear, except he is white, not brown. His face is nearly spherical with just a hint of a goatee. It has taken a long time, but now, five years after we met for the first time, I can proudly call him one of my best friends. As far as Spencer is from being a typical gamer, he is equally far from being a typical friend.

The first time I met Spencer, he was working in the library at our high school. His main duty was to make sure every student who walked through the glass double-doors without a class signed in. The sheet required the student to indicate which teacher wrote the pass to go to the library, what time he or she entered, and then what time he or she left. Most students did not bother to sign the sheet, so Spencer would have to stop every student coming in and tell him or her to sign in. Since I always signed the sheet, Spence would stop me and say, "Hey...thanks for signing in." I considered him more of an acquaintance than a friend at that time, but we got to know each other after I started dating his best friend, Vince.

From the moment Vince and I got together, animosity thrived between Spencer and me. He said anything he could think of to annoy me with the hope that I would leave Vince like most women did. More than once I asked what issue he had with me: he would simply say, "I don't trust anything that bleeds for five days and doesn't die." That is Spencer-Speak for "You are taking away my best friend, you... woman." It made me laugh. He made me laugh; however, we did have a solid friendship for the better part of two years. The only thing that encouraged me to not give up, even after Vince and I broke up, was Spence's imagination.

Spencer is one person I constantly find myself quoting. His spontaneous quips are so memorable few ever forget them. For example, one night Spencer was

talking with my mother about his relationship with Vince's mother. He tried to illustrate exactly how much he disdained speaking with her: "Talking with Vince's mother is like masturbating with a cheese grater... kinda interesting, but doesn't amount to anything." My mother was so shocked and entertained that she looked as though someone had just poked her, and she had to cover her mouth to keep from screaming. In another instance, Spencer scrambled the descriptions of the sky and of sheep: "The sky is fluffy and sheep are blue." He often prides himself on the originality of his thoughts and ideas, and truthfully, I have met very few others who come even close. While Spencer has very little faith in his ability to write, he has written a group of three small books that our circle of friends calls collectively *The Halo Testament*.

In *The Halo Testament*, the world works in a very unusual way. Spencer transformed each of his friends into characters in his story. Most of the group are archangels that represent different concepts. My character, for example, is the angel of severity: when something is wrong in the universe, my character has the power to make it worse. Additionally, in Spencer's universe, God lives in an apartment in New York City sitting on a couch eating Ramen and changing the answers to *Jeopardy*. The god of time is only twenty-one years old; he created the past when he was born (just go with it). The most important lesson in this world, however, is how to destroy it, and has now become a running joke among the group. In one of the books it clearly states that one should never shake up a warm can of Sierra Mist and open it upside down; the world will end. There is one catch, however: the person who commits this act cannot know that it will end the world, nor can that person be influenced by another who knows the consequences. Sadly, these books were lost. We do not know exactly where each one went, but we are fairly certain that they are not together.

Spencer's mind works a little off-kilter to the rest of the world. In many ways, he looks like a walking contradiction to people who do not know him well. For example, his character in his books is the angel of change; Haliel represents Spencer's desire to constantly be different. One day at seventeen, however, he decided that he wanted a tattoo. His father agreed to sign the paperwork allowing him to get one, and as a result, Spencer has an image of a dragon holding a ball with the Japanese symbol for "change" on his arm. Our circle of friends found it ironic to permanently etch the word "change" onto one's skin. Additionally, Spencer constantly rails on the poor storylines for role-playing video games. One night he said to me, "You may as well buy *Clifford* in ridiculous amounts." He, of course, was referring to the *Clifford the Big Red Dog* series. He believes that the stories of role-playing games are too simplistic, and one would be better off reading a children's book, but when one asks him what his favorite

video game is, he says *Final Fantasy Tactics*. It is a role-playing video game. It is the only one Spencer will claim has a story line.

I was most disturbed by Spencer, however, when he said he was going to join the Marines. There were two major problems with this idea. One, Spencer does not do well listening to authority figures. He would open his mouth and then get kicked out of the service. The other is that Spencer is a hemophiliac. More than once, our social circle explained to him that there was not a chance he would die in basic training, but rather it was guaranteed to happen. He had asked the recruiting agents if his condition would keep him out of the service, and they all told him to simply not mention it to certain people. Spence had signed all the paper work and had a departure date set. Thankfully, he realized there was something wrong with the amount of lying he would have to do to join the Marines and decided not to get on the bus.

Spencer Cassidy challenges the patience of all who come in contact with him. Intellectually, he keeps people on their toes. Unfortunately, he had a problem applying himself in high school. He had to retake algebra twice to pass it and still be able to graduate. He understood the material perfectly; he simply did none of the work. The last time he took the class, the teacher was trying to explain a concept to the class with little success. Spencer finally raised his hand and told the teacher that all he was doing was confusing the class and that he should stop. Figuring Spence to be simply a smart aleck, the teacher asked if Spencer would like to teach the rest of the class. He agreed and taught the rest of the class that day, and the class understood the concept by the end of the period. His teacher was infuriated and never allowed Spence to speak in his class again.

I would like to see Spence go somewhere with his intellect. He has wonderful ideas that could be shaped into fine pieces of writing if he would only apply himself. Right now, he works at a toy store, lives in Topeka, and indulges in his love of American comic books. I try to push him as much as I can without being so overzealous that he pushes back. Spencer is a truly unique individual. He is my only male friend who can proudly claim that he wears toe-socks with the word "Princess" on them.

How Powerful are Words?

Words can be used in many ways. Words are the foundation of civil communication. They can be used to build a person up or tear a person down. Words can be used to vindicate or convict. They can be used in love or in hate. Words used in a time of war are no different. Knowing how to use words properly in a time of war could be the difference between winning such a war and finding one's country over-run with enemy soldiers.

Despite all the bullets, bombs, planes, tanks and other hardware used to fight wars, one of the most powerful weapons in any arsenal is words. Bullets and bombs can be used to take lives and destroy countryside, but words can take morale and destroy the fortitude of an entire country. Robin Tolmach Lakoff asserts that, "Under normal conditions, most people find it very difficult to kill" (546). However, in war time words are used to motivate soldiers to kill. They are used to deface the enemy one is fighting against. It is much easier to kill a human being if that person is instead an evil idea. It is easier to turn one's country toward war with another country if the inhabitants of that country have evil sounding nicknames. Dehumanizing a people is the surest way to gain support for any war.

Defacing the enemy is not the only way words can be used in times of war. Propaganda is a powerful tool in the arsenal of those fighting to stay out of a war or of those dying to get into one. In World War I many Americans felt that isolationism was the best policy for America. Most Americans felt that it would be better to stay out of the war that Europe had started. In the end, America entered World War I, but that was only afterwards, when words, in the form of the Zimmerman Note, compelled them. In World War II, Americans did not have to be convinced to go to war, but they had to be encouraged by words to retain a strong resolve against two fearsome enemies: Germany and Japan. While America and the allied forces won the war, it was the words of leaders such as Franklin Roosevelt and propaganda, in the form of posters and films).

One of the greatest examples of words having powerful influence is the Cold War. While no physical warfare took place during the Cold War, words, especially threats, were powerful weapons in this non-violent conflict. While it was the threat of force against its own people that kept the Soviet Union afloat for so long, it was the will-power and the words of the western world that eventually brought down the Soviet empire.

Words when used improperly are fleeting and meaningless, but when wielded by a good speaker or by a good writer, words can have a powerful effect on an entire population. They can be used to make people laugh or cry, to start dialogue or stop it

dead. Words have the power to start war and the power to stop war. So how powerful are words? While it is impossible to measure the true power of words, one only needs to watch the reaction of people to know how effective the words really were. If the words started a war, one can be sure the words were truly powerful.

Writing a New Perspective on Life

Carefully, balancing my laptop on my knees, I typed in the web address for my online blog. My personal page opened, and I saw that I had another comment on the post I had written a couple of days before.

"I don't even know your dad (or you for that matter)," it said, "but I can imagine how hilarious that must've been, swing dancing! You always tell the best stories!"

I smiled looking at it because my reader had no idea why my life seemed to be so funny. Actually, my life is pretty mundane. I'm a college student who is taking far too many classes and attempting to work at the same time. In the little wedges around my commitments, I try to find time to write about whatever happens to me during the day. It's not that my life is funny. Quite the opposite actually. Life in the past year-and-a-half has been extremely difficult. I've simply learned to look for the funny moments in order to make it through to the end of the day.

Very few people know that I spent last summer as one of the six million depressed women in the world. It was one of those depressions that isn't very visible to others but that makes you want to curl up in the fetal position and cry until it is impossible to think or feel anymore. Occasionally, I would wonder if I was depressed, but I always tried to convince myself that I wasn't.

This past summer, I often spent my afternoons on my bed randomly clicking through Internet sites. My 4:30 am work mornings as a barista at a local coffee house took a toll on me. My fatigue, combined with the lead weight on my spirit, took away any motivation I had to accomplish anything. For several days, I had been toying with the idea of trying to find a depression symptoms quiz on the Internet. I looked over at my sister, who was reading on her bed across the room.

"Hannah?" I tried to ask nonchalantly. "Do you think I'm depressed?"

Even though I was finally voicing my fear out loud, I was trying to act like I was fine.

"Maybe a little bit," she said, looking up from her book. "I don't know. You seem a little sad sometimes."

"Okay," I quickly responded.

I didn't want to give her time to rethink her answer. I kept clicking through websites, but the idea of finding depression symptoms continued to gnaw at me. I had been *feeling* depressed for months, but I wasn't sure that I wanted to know I was depressed. I finally gave in. Going to Google, I entered, "depression quiz" into the search window. One million, seven hundred and twenty thousand hits came up.

I scrolled through the first page of hits, trying to find a reliable website. I found one. Carefully, I answered every question and then moved my cursor down to the submit button. With a little sigh, I clicked it, and up popped my analysis: moderate to severely depressed.

The analysis hit me like a fist. *Yeah, right*, shot through my head. *I'm not severely depressed*. But at the same time, I also thought ...*I may be moderately depressed...*

I still didn't want to tell anybody, and I figured it would eventually pass. Part of me, like fifty-four percent of people struggling with depression, saw it as almost a personal weakness.

The weeks sulked on, and by the end of the summer, I was mentally and emotionally exhausted. My job making espresso drinks provided a lot of time to think. There was only so much cleaning that I could do to fill in the time gaps between customers. Certain periods of the day were so slow that I had more than enough time to be quietly miserable in my own little world. I was very good at it. Hardly anyone caught on to my low spirits. A hot August day found me restocking paper supplies and wiping down the brown counters while again mulling over how sad I was. As my arm went around in circles, trying to buff all of the frappe spots and espresso drippings off the counter, I tried to rationalize my melancholy again. Finally, I confronted myself. Did I really want to continue living this way? I was, quite simply, tired of it.

"Life just cannot possibly be this bad!" I finally exclaimed. "Where are the happy points in life?"

After months of silently crying on the inside, I suddenly reached the end of my willingness to feel that way. The depression didn't evaporate like a rain puddle on a hot day, but it was the small moments that started to come into focus and take shape.

I found that if I started to look around a little bit, life was extremely funny and quite ironic at times. Up until that point, blogging was a past-time, a stress reliever at the end of the day; my attitude about life was the color that shaded my writing. I wasn't looking to change my writing style or entertain my friends. I simply tried to find something—anything—that would make me laugh. But because I always wrote about my day, the shift in my attitude started to show up in the little funny moments that made their way onto my blog. A funny conversation or the silly antics of my little brothers would stick with me all day long. At night, I began to recreate those moments that brought a smile to my face on my blog. The more I wrote about the happy, funny, ironic things in life, the happier I became.

I wish I could say that life immediately got better. It didn't. But after a few months of writing and being more open with friends about how I was feeling, the depression started to fade. I no longer struggle with depression, but I still like to use the small wedges in my time to blog about the funny moments in life. When I look at my days now, I'm not just looking for a laugh for myself; I want to share them with others. The responses from my readers tell me that I'm not the only one who enjoys a smile and a different perspective.

Writing as an antidote for depression was discovered purely by accident. However, the writing helped me to make the gradual shift from a lifestyle of misery into one that has many more smiles. And just as a warning: If I know you and you say something funny, you are fair game for my blog.

International Incident

“How would you like to spend a month in Paris?”

My dad posed this question to me over the phone one day during my senior year of high school. At first, I couldn't believe it. He explained that some of his friends from the accounting firm where he worked lived in Paris. They had two children, Andrew and Olivier, and their nanny was on vacation for the month of June. They asked my dad if my sister Brooke and I would be interested in the job for a month. I enjoy traveling, and Paris was one of the places I had always wanted to visit and never thought that I'd be able to go due to my lack of money. I jumped at the opportunity to fulfill my dream and wound up having quite an eventful month.

The Eiffel Tower was one of the first things I saw as the airplane began its approach to land at Charles De Gaulle airport; it seemed small enough to fit on a key chain. This was a top priority for my sister and me to see, so during our first week in Paris, we set off for the famous landmark: me with my handy-dandy guidebook and Brooke with her camera. It was cold and cloudy, with sudden bursts of wind that chilled to the bone, but the forecast called for clearing skies and warmer weather, so we decided that it would be a fine day. The clouds never cleared.

Brooke and I dropped our charges, Andrew and Olivier, off at school, somehow managed not to get lost on the subway, and arrived at our stop. I did not realize how incredibly huge the monument was until I was near its base. Pictures and far away views do not do the Tower justice. The idea that human beings, not too much unlike me, had created a structure so intricate and large made me feel quite insignificant.

We were both hungry, so we went to a concession stand and got some breakfast; I had a deliciously warm jelly doughnut and my sister had pizza, the breakfast of champions. While we sat on a bench beneath the gigantic tower, I decided I wanted my own camera. So I went to a gift shop, located in the base of one of the legs of the Tower, and purchased the cheapest disposable camera I could find. I went back to my sister, took a picture of her with pizza in her mouth, and told her to hurry up; I was getting cold. I strolled around, took some pictures of people rappelling down the inside of the Tower, and then went back to bother Brooke. She was finally finished. Now we had the task of deciding whether or not we wanted to pay two dollars extra for an elevator ride up or be cheap and walk. Being remarkably frugal, we both decided to take the stairs, consoling ourselves with the fact that after we reached the second part of the Tower, we had to take an elevator because the stairs were closed past that point. Halfway up the first section of the Tower, I vowed never to be a miser with my money

again: I got dizzy from going around and around and around and around the tightly wound stairs. At each landing, there were posters with different stories and facts about the Tower. I stopped and read each one.

"Rachael, what are you doing? Will you hurry up please?" said Brooke.

"Why? What's the rush?"

"You're such a wimp. You have to stop and rest. I'm in better shape than you."

"I'm not resting, I'm reading. These are very interesting, and you're fatter than me, so keep walking."

That shut her up, and I was free to read the stories, rest, and climb the stairs at my own pace. There are 1,665 steps in the Tower. Just a little something I learned on the way up the 704 steps that are open to the public. After what seemed like an hour, I finally reached the first tier. There was an open space to walk around and more posters with facts. I found my sister, who was panting just as badly as I was, and we read the posters and enjoyed the view. Brooke seemed a little scared of the height; she wouldn't go too near the edge and encouraged me to stay close to the inside of the Tower. We procrastinated for about ten minutes and then began to climb the rest of the stairs. Brooke climbed faster than me, which is probably due to the "reading" stops I made at each landing. As I was climbing, cursing myself for my stingy nature, Brooke passed me on her way down.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"I can't do it. The wind is blowing, and it's freaking me out. I'm too scared."

After she mentioned it, I realized that the wind was getting stronger. I was hot and sweaty from the work of climbing the stairs but cold and shivering because of the gusty winds. We were higher up, and although the staircase was enclosed in fencing, it seemed surprisingly open.

"Just meet me on the first level after you get to the top. Take some good pictures," I said. I tried to convince her to leave me her two hundred dollar camera, but she refused. I was too out of breath to argue very much, so I let her go. Step. Step. Step. I noticed that I could see through the stairs. Finally, I reached the second tier. I can now proudly say that I walked up the Eiffel Tower as far as they would let me. I highly recommend the elevator.

The view was amazing; I could see the Arc de Triomphe, Invalides, and the top of the bell towers of Notre Dame. The thought that I would soon be traveling higher was almost inconceivable. I was sad that Brooke wasn't there. I held my camera out over the side, took a couple of pictures, and then decided to get in line for the elevator

that would take me all the way up. I found the line, which was incredibly long, and started waiting. The people behind me kept running into me and then would laugh and chat with each other in French. It started to rain, and the wind picked up. I was cold and miserable and ready to just give up and go back down when I saw Brooke walking around near the inside of the Tower.

"Hey, Brooke! Over here!" She turned and came over, joining me in line. "How did you make it up? I thought you were scared."

"Yeah, but I figured that I don't know when the next time that I'll have the chance for this will be, so I kept my eyes on the stairs and just climbed."

"Good."

It was easier to wait out the cold and rain and take the elevator with someone to commiserate with. The two Germans in front of us started joking around and pushing each other. Between them and the French couple behind us, it's a wonder we weren't jostled over the side.

Twenty minutes later we were on the elevator that traveled at a slight angle all the way to the top. The doors opened, and all fifty of the elevator's occupants spilled out onto the top of the Eiffel Tower. We were in an enclosed space that had windows all the way around and little signs on the top that told people how far it was to certain countries in the direction they were facing. After climbing a few more stairs, we were outside. There was wire surrounding the observation deck, but it did not disrupt the view; the Arc de Triomphe, Invalides, and Notre Dame all looked much smaller up there. The mist from the rain painted a gloomy haze over the landscape. In the distance, Montemarte, the location of the infamous Moulin Rouge, appeared to be a model city on top of a faraway hill. Brooke and I found someone to take our picture, and then she went inside, much to my disappointment. However, I managed to get her camera from her, so I didn't have to use my cheap disposable one. She allowed me two pictures. I spent about fifteen more minutes choosing my pictures carefully and then went inside and took a picture of Brooke.

"You took more than two! I'm never letting you use my camera again. You're so irresponsible!"

"Well, you're obnoxious." I didn't say that, though, and we got in line for the elevator to go down. When we got out on the second tier, we walked around the gift shop in the middle of the Tower. There were overpriced souvenirs, a post office, and even a restaurant where you could buy a cup of coffee and a pastry for about six dollars.

The line for the elevator to the first tier was so long that we took the stairs, which was more work than I thought it would be. We walked around the first tier some more and then took the elevator down. We finally reached the ground, but I did not want to go; it was such an awe-inspiring creation and a marvel of construction that I just wanted to stay and bask in its vastness. Brooke pointed out, however, that it was almost time to pick up Andrew and Olivier from school, so I reluctantly followed her back to the subway.

Sedgwick and Cooper: Two Depictions of the Frontier Myth

The impulse to cultivate a common sense of identity and purpose amongst a nation's people can be traced back to the French Revolution, when revolutionaries attempted to revamp French culture to create nationalistic feelings that would impel the citizenry to fight for the state. The revolutionaries' tactics included adopting a national anthem, renaming the months of the year, manufacturing hats for supporters of the revolution to wear, and coining the slogan "Liberty, equality, fraternity." By rechristening churches "Temples of Reason," the revolutionaries exalted the secular state above other claims on people's loyalty, such as religion.

These are not the only means by which a nation can produce a sentiment of unity, however; another popular way societies generate this feeling is through the creation of national myths and ideologies. Richard Slotkin, in The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890, defines myths as "stories, drawn from history, that have acquired through usage over many generations a symbolizing function that is central to the cultural functioning of the society that produces them" (16). Ideologies, in turn, are "the system[s] of belief, values, and relationships that constitute a culture or society" (Slotkin, Fatal Environment 22). These two concepts are related because myths are used to justify and support a nation's dominant ideology. In the United States, the most pervasive and enduring myth is that of the frontier, "the conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top" (Slotkin, Regeneration 5). The nineteenth-century author Catharine Maria Sedgwick, although largely forgotten in literary history, uses the myth of the frontier in an even more effective way than does her contemporary James Fenimore Cooper, who is widely regarded as the foremost propagator of the frontier myth.

The frontier myth is closely related to the historian Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis of 1890 which, despite having been thoroughly discredited, continues to exert a powerful influence on American consciousness and culture. According to Turner, the frontier profoundly shaped the American character, creating a culture of democracy, mobility, and self-reliance. The frontier, untouched by civilization, was a place where all men started out on equal footing and could be successful if they were willing to work hard. In this way, the frontier functioned as a "safety valve" in American society—if workers in the east became too frustrated with the oppression they

experienced working in the factories or mills, they could go west, buy a plot of land, and become self-sufficient farmers, rather than rebelling against the social order. Turner worried that, with the official closing of the frontier in 1890, this safety valve would disappear, and American society would be thrown into chaos.

An essential quality of the frontier was that it was constantly receding, as a dwindling stream of settlers turned into a flood. When civilization encroached, wilderness-loving Americans packed up and relocated to unconquered territory. This is known as the “Daniel Boone syndrome,” and Turner believed that it accounted for the extraordinary mobility of Americans, who were likely to make several moves in their lives, usually going farther west each time. Self-reliance was necessary when attempting to carve a living out of an untamed wilderness, where few or no other people were around to offer assistance.

Turner’s thesis makes no mention of the original inhabitants of the frontier, the Native Americans; however, their presence was a fact of life on the frontier, and as such, they figure prominently in frontier mythology. One popular conception was that of the noble savage: having had no contact with the contaminating forces of civilization, Native Americans were believed to possess all the positive qualities of man in his natural state, such as innocence, generosity, simplicity, closeness to nature, and a kind of primitive morality (Slotkin, Fatal Environment 53, 67). While the character Magawisca in Catharine Sedgwick’s Hope Leslie challenges the prevailing nineteenth-century ideology regarding women, she conforms, in large part, to this noble savage stereotype. White settlers slay Magawisca’s brother; in return, her father, Mononotto, captures and intends to sacrifice a young white man, Everell Fletcher. Magawisca believes this bloodshed is wrong and makes several unsuccessful attempts to free Everell during the lengthy march to the village where the sacrifice is to be performed. Though her father confines her, under guard, once they reach the village, Magawisca ingeniously escapes and arrives at the sacrificial rock just as Mononotto is about to decapitate his prisoner:

The chief raised the deadly weapon, when Magawisca, springing from the precipitous side of the rock, screamed “Forbear!” and interposed her arm. It was too late. The blow was levelled—force and direction given; the stroke, aimed at Everell’s neck, severed his defender’s arm, and left him unharmed. (Sedgwick 2214)

The narrator subsequently describes Magawisca as “heroic” (Sedgwick 2214), but the native woman has only achieved her heroism by sacrificing herself to save a white man. Additionally, Magawisca’s savagery is emphasized in the description of the ritual she performs at her mother’s grave.

Despite wide acceptance of the noble savage concept, whites continued to view Native Americans as inferior due to their pagan belief system, lack of modern technology, and tribal political organization (Slotkin, Fatal Environment 53). Moreover, because white settlements often existed in such close proximity to native villages, there was a fear that contact between the two races would lead whites to abandon civilization for the less restrictive native lifestyle. This fear is realized in Hope Leslie when Hope learns that her sister Faith, taken in the same raid that captured Everell, has married a Native American. Hope reacts with hysterics and tears, crying, "God forbid! My sister married to an Indian!" and "O, God! restore my sister to the Christian family" (Sedgwick 2216). Hope refuses to believe Magawisca's assertions that Faith is happy with her husband and vows to try and coax her into coming back to live in the colony.

Native Americans' supposed inferiority, especially their paganism, allowed whites to slaughter them without qualms of conscience, in the belief that God's will was thereby being done. This mindset of holy war began with the Puritans; in The Fatal Environment, Richard Slotkin writes that for Puritans such as Samuel Nowell:

the justification of racial separation and of the racial warfare that accompanies it lies in the divine ordering of nature. [Nowell] sees the New World as torn between forces representing absolute dark and pure light, embodied in two nations of different blood and religion One or the other must be destroyed or enslaved. (59)

By wiping out the Native American heathens, Puritans hoped to usher in the Second Coming of Christ as predicted in the New Testament. The Puritans in Hope Leslie share this attitude: "The notion that the Indians were the children of the devil was not confined to the vulgar; [sic] and the belief in a familiar intercourse with evil spirits ... was then universally received" (Sedgwick 2219). Due to such thinking, Magawisca is accused of devil worship, called a "conspirator against the peace of God's people" (Sedgwick 2220), and nearly executed; only her eloquence and her mangled form, which reminds the Puritans how she once saved one of their own, avert her death.

To wage the sacred war against Native Americans, frontier mythology employs a hunter-hero. This character is a self-reliant loner who chafes under government regulation and so retreats to the untamed reaches of the wilderness. Here, he encounters Native Americans and becomes somewhat acculturated to their way of life, learning how to hunt and fight as they do. As Slotkin points out, however, the hunter "learns from the Indians only in order to destroy them" (Fatal Environment 64). The first and most influential of these hunter-heroes was Daniel Boone, immortalized in "The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon," by John Filson (Slotkin, Regeneration 268).

Filson's Boone is an avid outdoorsman who moves to Kentucky in search of his two passions, game and seclusion. Once he realizes the beauty and potential of the land, Boone decides to establish a settlement there, and the story reaches a critical turning point: "This attempt inevitably leads to warfare with the native Indians, and Boone's emergence as a military hero" (Slotkin, Fatal Environment 67). Boone's actions make Kentucky safe for settlers, but the increased population ruins the wilderness with which he fell in love, causing him to search out a more remote area—the first example of the aforementioned Daniel Boone Syndrome (Kushner).

The Daniel Boone created by Filson was the template for James Fenimore Cooper's famous Leatherstocking character. Like Boone, Leatherstocking is the first white man to settle in a rough, uncultivated locale. In The Pioneers, or the Sources of the Susquehanna, Marmaduke Temple describes the scene as it existed before he established the town of Templeton:

Not an opening was to be seen in the boundless forest, except where the lake lay, like a mirror of glass. The water was covered by myriads of the wild-fowl that migrate with the changes in the season; and, while in my situation on the branch of the beech, I saw a bear, with her cubs, descend to the shore to drink. I had met many deer, gliding through the woods, in my journey; but not the vestige of a man could I trace, during my progress, nor from my elevated observatory. No clearing, no hut, none of the winding roads that are now to be seen, were there; nothing but mountains rising behind mountains (Cooper 2191)

Finally, Temple discovers a solitary log cabin—the domicile of Leatherstocking. Returning from the hunt, Leatherstocking comes upon Temple and invites the man to stay the night with him. At first, Temple says, Leatherstocking behaved in a friendly manner, but once he learned the purpose of Temple's visit, his demeanor changed dramatically:

the cordiality of his manner very sensibly diminished, or, I might better say, disappeared. He considered the introduction of the settlers as an innovation on his rights, I believe; for he expressed much dissatisfaction at the measure (Cooper 2192)

Leatherstocking's irritation at the intrusion of settlers into his territory is clearly reminiscent of Boone's. Though Leatherstocking does not relocate in The Pioneers, by the end of the Leatherstocking tales, "the sound of the ax has driven him from his beloved forests to seek refuge, by a species of desperate resignation, on the denuded plains that stretch to the Rocky Mountains" (Cooper, qtd. in Kushner).

Another similarity between the Boone of myth and Leatherstocking is that neither ever marries. Despite the fact that Leatherstocking is responsible for the rescues of several white women captured by Native Americans, when he has the opportunity to marry, he refuses (Kushner). Leatherstocking's self-enforced celibacy may, at first, appear unusual, but it contains an important social message. Having been raised among Native Americans, Leatherstocking is irrevocably tainted with their savagery (Slotkin, Fatal Environment 80), and it would be inappropriate for him to marry a white woman. At the same time, however, "in all matters of conscience and affection, [Leatherstocking] is pure white and highly conscious of that fact He asserts at every opportunity the doctrine that the 'pure' and 'unmixed' race is best—whether white or Indian" (Slotkin, Fatal Environment 91). Thus, Leatherstocking can no more marry a Native American woman than he can a white one; in this way, Cooper uses the Leatherstocking character to praise the separation of the races and espouse the superiority of whites, reinforcing the dominant ideology of nineteenth-century America.

The frontier of myth is a magical land of plentiful resources free for the taking, starkly opposed to the scarcity and competition that prevail in cities; as Slotkin notes, "The Frontier-goers are motivated by a combination of positive and negative factors; but the crucial determinant is the belief in cheap and abundant resources beyond the Frontier" (Fatal Environment 41). In The Pioneers, Cooper supports this notion, as well. After a long winter, the men of Templeton celebrate the arrival of spring with a pigeon-shoot, assembling on the flank of a mountain armed with any manner of weapon they can find, from rifles to mere sticks. The men wantonly bring down the birds until the ground is covered with their bodies, and yet, still more pigeons keep coming:

Some millions of pigeons were supposed to have already passed, that morning, over the valley of Templeton; but nothing like the flock that was now approaching had been seen before. It extended from mountain to mountain in one solid blue mass, and the eye looked in vain over the southern hills to find its termination. (Cooper 2199)

The succeeding chapter offers an additional testament to the abundance of the frontier; one fishing expedition on Otsego Lake yields two thousand bass (Cooper 2206). Marmaduke Temple's fears about the consequences of such "wasteful extravagance" are immediately dismissed by the Sheriff, who protests,

But this is always the way with you, Marmaduke; first it's the trees, then it's the deer, after that it's the maple sugar, and so on to the end of the chapter. One day, you talk of canals, through a country where there's a

river or a lake every half-mile, just because the water won't run the way you wish it to go; and the next, you say something about mines of coal, though any man who has good eyes ... can see more wood than would keep the city of London in fuel for fifty years (Cooper 2206-2207)

The images of copious natural resources in the Sheriff's speech override and negate Templeton's momentary anxiety, again conforming to the frontier myth.

Leatherstocking's similarity to the Daniel Boone character is obvious to any reader familiar with the latter, and the theme of nature awakening to "supply the wants of man" runs through all the Leatherstocking tales (Cooper 2189); therefore, it is easy to see why Cooper has been identified as the foremost propagator of the frontier myth. Sedgwick, in contrast, supports the myth in a manner not readily apparent on a first reading. Magawisca's acts of independence and defiance, so unusual for female characters in nineteenth-century writing, distract the reader from the ways in which she falls into the noble savage stereotype. Moreover, through endless repetition, the concept of the noble savage has become so ingrained in American culture that many readers would consider Magawisca's actions only natural for a Native American woman and would not give them a second thought. Sedgwick's use of the frontier myth, which is only evident upon a close reading of her text, is thereby more effective than Cooper's blatant utilization. Sedgwick's operates on the mind of the reader without him or her realizing it; it becomes part of the unconscious and is thus more difficult to be rid of.

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Summer Songs

Cued, perhaps, by pale green leaf tips,
Full spring growth reaching into summer heat,
Locusts sing. Properly cicadas – not the less
Formal and colloquial locusts used by
Seven year old boys.

Seven year old boys stalking lightning bugs
To fit into prison jars stolen from their mothers
Tin lids, nail-punched air holes, a few grassy
Leaves, bed or breakfast for unfortunate prisoners
Flashing magic codes in evening dark.

Young boys don't know about cicadas
Locusts, though, are known commodities
Brown husks, paper-thin shells gingerly
Picked from tree bark low enough
To reach in daylight treasure hunts.

Great luck is theirs if in stalking
Lightning bugs, green wings and
Buzzing thick body of a locust is taken.
Shouted glee accompanies such capture.

One fewer locust left to sing its summer
Song, more a buzz than hum; yet locusts'
Humming buzz rises, falls, rises, no single
Buzz heard alone, rather, rubbing sets of legs
That I first heard behind streetcar wheels
Clacking over Troost Avenue tracks, tracks
And buzz joined in lingering heat, darkening shade.

Now, in the suburbs, summer comes to me
Where no seven year old boys chase lightning
Bugs in lingering heat, darkening shade,
No Troost Avenue streetcar clacks
Swiftly on, and only locusts sing.

Grandma Betty Yellow

Teeth show through ancient smile
Light tea in porcelain cups
Sunflower in a vase

Smoke stained walls forever
Window welcomes sunshine
Sandhills roll inside

Age-hardened lamb is gone
Her weathered tombstone stays

Bob

I once went to a party
where everyone's name was Bob
except mine.
Bobs were smashed against the wall.
Bobs were eating all kinds of food.
Bobs were conversing with Bobs.
Bobs and Bobs and I the lone flying kite
in a mizzle of Bobs, a circus of Bobs,
a mistrel of Bobs,
liking Bobs,
loving Bobs.
Their Bob impression a thin mist
covering the party atmosphere,
melting against my oneness,
my differentia covered with Bob;
each touched by love, a poet.
Anxious and unwilling,
I changed my name to Bob,
and they all loved me,
and I became a poet.

Orange Eyes

Orange flirt darts to my crotch
Back arched, legs akimbo
Nape provokes mad nibbles
Sizzling breath against my skin
Witty Dialogue: "Nuhh..."
My ego swells with blood

A Bullet for this Happy Head

A bullet for this happy head
Tells me that my world is dead
Lullaby of lies and blood
But not just yet does it dive in
To swim in my own lies and sin
It screams out, but it's a dud

A bullet for this happy head
Says he can do the deed instead
Go for it, you steed of ire
Jumping up to penetrate
Falls flat and lies prostrate
Empty shell's all talk, no fire

A bullet for this happy head
Assuring me that I'll see red
Finally, a round with heart
Doesn't waste another breath
Sets his sights to bring sweet death
And finally he does his part

A bullet in this happy head
Is all I ever wanted, see?
At last delivered, merciful lead
And happy head is gone from me

The Evening News

I met a man who said do
what I can, when I can,
about Fakers.

Don't be nonsensed by nonsense of nonsense
Knowing you've been nonsensed.

Hood winked
and Run amuck

Or dealing in nothing
Instead of others

They're not in my home
But in my life
Blind in front of our eyes
We watch it
All layout
Lamed out.

The Cat Chase

(Women's Funky History)

Women are taught to be coy in the womb.
Men speak freely about
their sexual prowess,
whip thangs out like guns blasting targets of cat.
The sex closets that women hide in
and pop out with their panties smoking
keep them close-mouthed about their lying lust,
while men's braggadocio is in the forefront
with their locker room conversation - -
women *can kiss it but not tell it*,
and if they do,
the women who were baby girls hear
the whispers of their female relatives
telling them to keep their legs twisted tight
and their lips clamped shut.

How Romantic?

World is whirling.
Colors
I cannot
describe dart about me.
Why
can't I feel anything?
What's happened to me?
Can't see!
Must
breathe.

Mist beginning to clear.
I feel linoleum
cold
beneath me.
But I cannot move,
or reach my arms.
My pulsating head seeks for
something steady.

Groping for answers,
I remember
searching for a water glass
when the walls
began to lurch and collide.
The floor pounced up
to swallow me,
just before
swirling darkness
enveloped my senses.

Gasping in my leaden chest,
I hear a voice,
floating from reality
to my fright.
"Look! She's fainted. How
romantic!"

Awake

Wound tight and keeping distance
I was there
A participant but not invested
He gathered all the lust he had and tried to take me with him
As I gratified I sickened
I could go but not hold his hand
It was a frigid trip every time

Now here's a new hand
I find myself in Edna's waters
Grabbing, loosening, and coming
I am a warm seeping player tripping every time

The Velvet Night

Under an uncontrollable heavenly body,
a pleasure dome twinkled above the red barn
as the razzing, oblique sounds of May amplified.

We met in the middle,
a form of X intersected on the weary hay.
In the midst of our rebellious fervor,
while sharply snatching my wide eyes
with his boiling bulk and voluminous fading smile;
I suddenly refused his star lust courtesies.

I used to adore those dwindling dimpled cheeks
which I now sank in like mud holes,
like shadows
as his snub nose pierced my breast.

Into an intuitive trenching
I questioned our chaotic mass of pulp,
then the small facts of slamming barn doors,
and windy why's that chilled my blood
as my cricket heart beat nearly stopped.

His surgical incision good-bye,
the proof of the moon's hypocrisy
across disappointed lobes.

I birthed another lock-nut friendship gone sour;
friction between he and the not-so-easily twisted screw space
which surrounded him on his way out.

In rattlesnake delirium he threw his love away.
Uncovered,
I threw on the velvet night
kicking the Jack bottle down the hillside
as the barn breathed randomly behind me.

Silence.

"You know she doesn't care anymore."

Silence.

And then the silence is broken. A horrid cacophony of wails bends everything to its will, and then is drowned in the silence once more.

"You are not enough."

Silence.

"She needs more in these wretched times, and you are not the one to console her."

"BITCH!"

"No, do not be angry. You know it is not her fault, but neither is it yours. The blame cannot be laid so easily. Take comfort in that small fact."

Silence.

And the silence is not broken, but a slowly escalating whirlwind is seeping into the void, and her voice emerges from the darkness, soft and airy.

"I am sorry."

Silence.

"No, you cannot be silent now. The bond will be broken and lost forever if you do not do what needs to be done. But easy, for it is a shaky path you tread."

"Please, say something."

Silence.

"Do not fear! The past is gone and nothing exists but you and her. She is reaching out; do not turn away!"

"Okay." The wonderfully soft voice scars over, and her presence is gone. You are left alone with the wind, the terrible wind, and your will is bending. But once more from the void comes the voice tinged with bitterness. "I tried."

Silence.

There is nothing left.

On the Subject of Zombies ...

BRAINS!

Wilting in radio static

Hopped-up jingles selling the American Scheme:

Big cars,

bigger breasts,

ignorance,

and laugh tracks.

Corpses take in mass-produced minds,

downloading values and beliefs

choosing the ones that cost the least

priceless effort and painful thought.

So the zombie brains' constructions

go to the moronic bidder,

like no-bid Iraq WAR contracts,

corrupt, expensive, and shoddy.

The Object of My Affection

She's black and blue
With all the right moves

I met her on a Saturday night
Gorgeous and bold, looks like she can take a nigga on

Man, would you look at that
The brotha to my left was all wonderin' eyes
But in my head, I said, "Naw, man, she's all mine, so step aside and let us be."

Feet in stilettos
Hair in a cute style
Legs long and certifiably correct

She became the object of my affection
Hand picked just for me
Just...wait...you'll see

I'm gonna make her fall in love with me

"Um...excuse me,
Can I trouble you for a spell?"

She looked at me as if I smelled,
Like I was crazy or something,
Then walked on by, to the brotha on my left

See, that's how sista be
They wan a "real man"
But half the time, they confused

I myself, well, I'm 100% in all areas
But that's what women don't see

I'm not desperate enough to put my profile on the web screen

The only solution I see is
Ladies, please don't walk past me

Now she will never know what she could have seen

And as far as me...well...
Oh man, who is that?
"Um...excuse me, can I trouble you for a spell?"

Spoken Word

Ömeant as a form of poetry to other
But to me it is more
It is release from tension that
Collaborates with stress to try
And ease my bliss
It is perpetual thought after thought
Of wisdom that pours from the
Heart of the speaker
Spoken wordÖ. Donít you
Love the sound of that
Those 1-2-3 beautiful syllables that
Ring so lightly in your ear
Spoken word, so easy to manipulate
The emotions of the piece
Pain, anger, hatred can flow and stream out of a tranquil piece
Like a subtle waterfall flowing into a
Quiet bed
Like sleep taking over a restless child
Spoken wordÖ a profound
Masterpiece that would bring artistic
Gods like da Vinci or Van Gogh to their knees.
Spoken word, you canít resist the
Power of those 1-2-3 beautiful syllables

Nuclear Future

I see mutants walking
Puss-dripping faces never talking
Sunken eyeballs are always watching

Dead, loose flesh hanging from bones
Poisonous water they can only moan
All food is dead, stomachs just groan

*Apocalypse, the mushroom cloud gives birth
A heavenly site developed from hell on earth*

I don't care about the millions dead
Bodies all around missing heads
Humanity hanging by a thread

Mutated bones and mutated minds
Scorched earth that was left behind
The fallout reaches all mankind

*Apocalypse, the mushroom cloud gives birth
A heavenly site developed from hell on earth*

Women and children, lives not spared
They never gave warning, they never cared
Ugly lost mutants, missing hair

Radiated skin from the nuclear blast
Babies born with no arms, life won't last
Radiated skin, mutation of the masses

*Apocalypse, the mushroom cloud gives birth
A heavenly site developed from hell on earth*

The Holy Hour

Midnight.
Punch in the code,
Open and
Slam the door to
Awake the adorer
Before me.

A greeting.
Pleasantries exchanged.
Two knees genuflect.
Sign of the cross
"Hello"
And I look
Loving You.

Sip hot chocolate.
Pray the rosary.
And I look
Loving You.

The door slams.
I awake.
A greeting.
Pleasantries exchanged.

Two knees genuflect.
"Goodbye"
Sign of the cross
"Come with me"
And I look
Loving You.

Kansas City Heat

Heat comes Kansas City summer heat,
Not on little cat feet like Sandburg's Chicago fog,
Not as a blanket, either,
More like drums, big drums,
Hot jazz, maybe, Kansas City
Sweaty, hot jazz.

The media, though, are all over
The heat, blanket-like,
Covering the story
To tell us "Heat blankets the city,
The Metro, the Midwest!"

If heat really covered us, blanket-like,
We could poke a toe out its edge
Slide a leg sideways
So one quarter of us escaped
That blanket heat to cooler air.

We could roll the blanket back,
Push it off our chests,
Scrunch it into a long, messy fold
Down at the bed's foot.
We could kick it with both feet.

If we really wanted to escape
Our blanket of heat,
We could mothball it with
Our other woolens, keep it whole cloth,
Until next winter blankets us
With snow, ice. Then the folks who ask
"Is it warm enough for you?"
Shift to "Is it cold enough for you?"

We'll want our blanket then, I betcha.

The Medusa

Fire drips from her scathing tongue.

It scorches my heart.

I feel her wrath and tremble--

She grins.

A mother's love is immaculate, unconditional.

So you are not my mother.

He held me tight and caressed my hair.

He said it would be okay--

But he doesn't understand.

Fire spews from her scathing tongue

And my heart turns to stone.

Beige

Suffered shift in a cube
Bland crate goes home to 'burbs
Blank stare at pleasure tube

Gated refuge locked tight
Keeps US in and THEM out
To cower through the night

Walled up and plugged in brains
Buy in, and Fear remains

Mother's Long Fingernail

As I scanned her frozen face
with her eyes shut,
she was lying still in her royal blue suit
with her arms folded and her hands clasped.
I noticed a long fingernail on her left middle finger
where she wore her wedding ring,
a symbol of pride and love for my father,
a World War II Veteran who became
the Picasso of house painters.
She was Queen to all who knew her.
I realized she would never cut her fingernails again.
She seemed to be just sleeping.
But in the back of my memory, I heard the sound
clip, clip, clip, clip.
She'd always say, "I sure hate to cut my nails."

Beware the Bulbous Bully

Something hideous lurks beneath the naïve multitude of humans that tramples across its graveyard. Buried alive, this wretched demon conspires against the unfortunate hands that will someday unleash its fury. Woe to the soul who sets free this bitter tyrant: the onion.

The first touch of this revolting vegetable sends shivers throughout the body. The ghastly thing resembles an aged corpse, with skin flaking off of its pale body. Sauté the fiend and it becomes translucent like a ghost, refusing to take its rightful place in the underworld.

One should always keep a distance from this vampire, which draws out the bodily fluids of all who strike its gaze. A wooden stake is useless against such a devil, because it has no heart. Layer by layer, a dissection of the onion reveals emptiness within. No good may ever come from such a creature—there exists no greater bully than the onion.

The Space and the Silence

I long for the space between the lines
 and I love for the silence between the notes.
The two collide, and I am in joy
 draw the note and conduct the line
 and I sculpt the perfect happiness.
Chisel in hand, the soothing aroma
 of rhythm and rhyme wafting heavily about me
 I begin the rigorous extraction.
Everything inside to everything outside
 I paste my breath upon the world.
The ear and the eye pull chains to strain the heart
 and the mind can do naught
 but sigh and sulk.
What is the reason? What is the logic?
 but the mind receives only silence in return
 the silence between the notes.
Now the ear takes the chisel, and the eye the hammer
 and once again the mind can do nothing
 but waste in despair at the encroaching emptiness
 of what is left of the wilting heart.
What is the reason? What is the logic?
 but the mind is faced only with empty space
 where the heart once was
 the space between the lines.
I long for the hammer, and I love for the chisel
 and in drawing the note
 and conducting the line
 I sculpt the perfect happiness.

My Chocolate Curiosity

Erotic Hershey Kisses,
Umm....so passionate and sweet,
My MAN,
My candyman,
His dark skin,
So tasty intertwined in my peanut butter complexion,
Our unison reminds me of Reese's Cups,
Not too brittle,
Not too sweet,
But his love is just right,
I embrace him,
Admiring his glistening body,
The same shade as hot fudge,
I'm satisfied,
His flavor is so tempting,
I can't help but to indulge on his sweetness,
My MAN,
My candyman,
My Chocolate Curiosity.

You Ever Seen a Dead Body Float by on a Saturday Afternoon?

Fat, swole rubber lips
Minute bulky bubbles sewn together
Wrinkling to circular OOOs
From chap and fart.

Paper white eyes like demons

Floating by

Ms. Johnson
made things hanging from looms

Looking like cartoons.
Singing women on billboards with Nipsey Russell in *The Wiz*. What will I do?

Blown up, spitting worms
Aunt Anne's soft skin melting away

Dannavan is 17
Stephany 6
Bob was 2

Holding hands and wearing no shoes

Floating by

Transfusion

I bask in it
Like a feline in sunlight
The faint blue haze of morning time lulls me to sleep
Like you could have had the chance to
Amidst my chaos unrelenting
But now I am the night
Nocturnal
So I don't have to deal with petty daytime dreaming
Can I keep you?
I see you
I get a telephonic clone of your voice
An aural message traveling through a chilled reptile
And the ice between us
It's real now
Inches of glass contain you
Hold me back
I don't have the real you anymore
For all I know
You're a holographic projection
Behind that icy wall of disgust
Why did you let the poison take you?
Because you were its drunken whore
Look inside my face
It's a portrait of you
Obliterated from my reality
Then released from this abyss
But still diseased and disordered
You wanted transcendence from this ill fate
So how did I cure you?
I unlocked the sapphire atrium
And gave you a soul transfusion
Through sea green eyes

You're cute, but...

I don't want to fix you.

I don't want to lead--

 Sure as hell don't want to follow.

I don't want to be responsible / held responsible

 For your happiness,

 Your cure,

 Your every-waking-moment's pleasure.

I do not want to be everything to you

Because you will not be everything to me.

I will not wrap my world / my heart /

 my mind around you.

I will open them up--

 Hold them out to you.

If you can't share equal parts with me

 Let's just forget it.

If we can't walk literally fucking side by side

 Then get out.

Tried that before. Left it behind.

I don't wanna be a teacher / nurse / mommy.

I am not on the clock.

I wanna grow / learn /

 Feel with you.

Not for you. Not instead of you.

 Tried that, too.

I don't want to indulge you / deny you / change you.

I don't want to be without you.

 Hypocritical me.

Just thought you should know I'm into you.

Unemployed

Red-eyed, ass-scratching shuffle
Up broken, wobbly stairs.

Find a roach, skin it.
Gurgling bong hurts my head.

Roomie lights up with lit cigarette,
Adds another butt to the pile.

Exchange annoyed looks
At each other's smoke.

Watch races.

Mine fifty cents from the couch.
Door swings open, noon sun stings.

Stumble down slanting porch
And over hot concrete.

"Just the paper."
Asshole clerk sneers.

Tear through classifieds.
Whiskey's in the freezer.

Mundane Ecstasy

Aroma of wet asphalt and oil

Bashing the snooze button

Clicking a ballpoint pen

Drenched in sea water

Enveloped in warm blankets

Father's lullaby

Gasping in frozen air

Hiding in a washing machine

Igloos at home

Jubilant songs

Killing sprees on Halo

Light bulb chimes

Midnight food runs

Newspaper rubberbands

Open air theatres

Princess tiaras

"Quad 9" damage attacks

Recipes from Mom

Sushi

Treetop napping

UVA and UVB protection

Violin scores

Wrestling with cousins

X-tra fresh laundry

Yodelers

Zeitgeist-the spirit of the times

A Mental Vaginismus

I am daily written in spasms
frozen in a dialysis of spirit
moving faster and slower
producing sound waves.

There is and isn't any bitter desire,
any prepared by me
as a premeditated offspring.

To lie to myself
would be a disappointment
and I simply hate
to hear myself re-echo.

Blessed and cursed by Him
what used to be velour
is now a mental vaginismus of deception.

I hate my nerves to twitch like that
as the hinged lid
lets the words spill onto the page
signs of the calamity of reality.

fiction



Manhunt

The small double doors of Dusty's Saloon squeaked when they opened. A tall, slim figure stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the bright sunlight outside. All commotion in the bar stopped, and all eyes turned to the newcomer. She surveyed the room for a moment and then took five methodical steps forward, leaving the doors to swing behind her.

She was a tall woman with curly red hair and a few freckles spotting her cheeks. She had a piece of gum in her mouth, and when she chewed, her jaw made a rounding motion. She wore the traditional blue shirt with brown vest combination that was common for law officials in the area. A dull five-pointed star adorned the left side of her vest, and it was no secret that underneath it hid a six inch .46 caliber revolver. She traced the visible area with her eyes, then addressed the room.

"Sorry t' interrupt y'all's good toim," she said in an Irish accent. "Fer those who moight not be from around these parts, moi name is Annie Belle. Oi'm th' local shariff." She paused, taking in the room again. "Oi have 't on good authority that a dangerous criminal is ahoidin' out in this foin establishment. Would enybody here loike t' do their civic duty an' tell me where Elijah Corvis moight be holed up?"

Annie received no answer, only continued stares. This didn't surprise her, and she nodded expectantly.

"Bartender," she called to the man behind the counter. "Y'got any information moight help me out?"

"Sorry, miss," the barkeep replied. He was a short man with a tired face and gritty voice, the sign of a lifetime smoker. He was a strange sort, what with his bushy beard and eye patch.

"What happened t' Dusty?" Annie asked him, referring to the regular proprietor of the saloon. "If y' don't moind me askin'."

"He's sick," the bartender said. "Got an infection of some sort. I'm fillin' in."

Annie studied him for a moment, then nodded and turned back to the congregation.

"If y' haven't heard, Elijah Corvis is a very bad man." She spoke in simple terms, as if she were addressing children. "He's murdered many, an' stolen from many more. He's wanted in six states, an' he's only been to foive. His heartless actions have destroyed many a family...an' I would be loyin' t' ya if I said that moi own was not among 'em."

"Cry me a river," a man sitting at a table next to her whispered to himself. Annie's right hand snatched his left shoulder and clamped down like a shark on a hunk of meat.

"Y'ought ta know better than t' insult a lady, lad," she said, staring down at the man without turning her head. "'Specially when she's in earshot." The man tried to pull himself away, but it only prompted Annie to squeeze his shoulder tighter and yank him closer. She held a surprising amount of strength in her slender frame, and anyone within a few feet would swear that they heard the man's shoulder pop. He tried to hide his scream behind his clenched teeth as tears welled up in his eyes.

"Since y're feelin' so incloined t' speak, p'rhaps y' moight be givin' me some answers to the questions Oi been askin'," Annie said. Then, all humor left her voice. "Where's Elijah Corvis?"

"I-I don't know," the man gasped. "I swear, I ain't seen him since four days ago. Please, leggo muh arm!"

Annie loosened her grip but kept her hand on his shoulder. "So y' admit to workin' for 'im, then?" she asked.

The man almost spoke, then simply bowed his head low to avoid any eye contact.

"They most be roight with what they say 'bout foinding' good help," Annie said as she scanned the rest of the room again. "Elijah can't even get a man who can keep a secret. Bote Oi guess it just makes moi job tha' much easier."

Annie finally took her hand from the man's shoulder, but she wasn't done with him yet. As he tried to stand, she grabbed him by the collar of his red shirt and pulled him up to face her. With her left hand, she took her .46 caliber out from its holster under her vest and held it close to the man's cheek.

"Where is Elijah Corvis?" she repeated.

"I told ya, I don't know!" the man said as he squirmed. "I mean...I heard he might'a left town...gone on to Doll's Peak."

Annie furrowed her brow and cocked her pistol. The man whimpered and closed his eyes. He heard a gunshot, a chorus of gasps, and one high-pitched scream but felt no pain. He opened his eyes to see the lawwoman looking away from him, holding her smoking gun at arm's length. Another patron at the other end of the room had tried to catch Annie off-guard with a pistol of his own. She'd beaten him to the shot but had only used her bullet to disarm him. He was holding his hand and gawking at Annie in wide-eyed disbelief.

"Next one o' you trois anything' like that gets dropped," Annie addressed the crowd. "Oi'm not playin' around." Then she returned her attention to the man she had in her grasp. "Have you changed yer story yet, lad?"

"I...I can't tell you anything!" he said. "I swear, he...he said he'd kill my ma if I told! Please..."

"He ain't gonna be killin' anyone once he's hangin' boi his neck from a tree," Annie said. "Now tell me where he is, and Oi'll even make him kiss yer feet b'fore I string him up."

"Miss!" a voice called from behind Annie. She turned again to see a young man, probably in his early twenties, standing up from his chair at a corner table.

"Please, don't hurt this man anymore. I...I'll tell you where Mr. Corvis is."

Annie looked at the man she held. Some of the fear had left his eyes, replaced by a mixture of hope and confusion. Annie released his collar and motioned for him to sit, which he did hastily. Then she turned back to the youth in the corner.

"All roight, lad. Speak."

"He's here, miss, in this very room. He's..." He was cut off when the much larger man next to him forcefully pulled him back down into his chair.

"Shut yer mouth, ya little snitch!" he growled. "What're ya tryin' to pull, rattin' out the man that pays ya?"

"I-I been thinkin', Mel," the young man stuttered, his western accent becoming more pronounced out of anxiety. "What we do...i-it ain't right. We shouldn't be stealin' an' hurtin' folks that don't deserve it. I-I mean, they's worked hard for what they got, so it ain't fair fer people what ain't done nothing' for it to take it away."

The larger man fumed. "Why, I oughta..."

"Leave him alone, Mel!" a woman at an adjacent table commanded. She reached over and grabbed Mel's shoulder. He spun around and backhanded her. The sound of his hand connecting with her face was like a blast from a fireworks show. The woman fell out of her chair to the floor, where she cried in pain.

"You keep yer hands to yerself, woman!" Mel said.

Suddenly, a man stood up and clocked Mel with a right fist. Mel answered with a punch that sent the man flying backwards onto his table, breaking glasses and dishes. Another man jumped onto Mel's back, attempting to apply a choke- hold. Mel reached back, grabbing him by the hair, and brought him down with a slam. Then he pulled him back up and flung him into two other charging men.

All of the women in the area fled, as did the men who were with them. One man helped up the woman Mel had hit and took her to join those who were leaving.

Others continued to join in the brawl. Annie angrily navigated her way through the panicking crowd, and when she reached the scene of the ruckus, she held her lawmaker barrel-up towards the ceiling and fired. The fighting stopped, and the men focused their attention on Annie once again.

"Everybody put a plug in this nonsense an' sit down, or Oi'll..." She stopped abruptly when she heard the "click" of a hammer being pulled back on a pistol behind her. She instinctively ducked, and the inevitable shot sounded. A bullet shattered a bottle of whiskey, and its contents - along with bits of glass - exploded onto whoever was in the vicinity. Annie spun around to see four men standing behind a table. One was aiming his gun at her. She dove to her right and rolled as he fired again. She kicked a table over to use as cover. Shots immediately began to ricochet off of it, and she could tell by their rapidness that the other men had drawn their weapons and joined the firing squad.

"Dammit," one yelled over the gunfire. "How hard can it be to kill one stinkin' woman?"

Annie glanced behind her to see all of the men who had been fighting - even big, bad Mel - run for their own cover.

Annie waited, focusing on the sound of the bullets hitting the table. She knew they would have to reload eventually, and she could easily pick them off then. She didn't have to wait, however, as their attention was diverted by the sound of yet another gun firing. This one, however, was coming from above.

"Hey!" a voice called. It was followed by a sharp whistle. The firing stopped. Annie looked up to see a man wearing a black cowboy hat standing behind the railing of the balcony. He waved his arms in the air. In his left hand, he held a pistol. "You sharpshooters want a target; why not take a crack at me?"

He's distracting them, Annie realized. She used this opportunity to spring to her feet and squeeze off four shots. Each hit their respective bull's-eyes, and the four men fell.

Annie was about to turn and thank the gentleman on the balcony when she was grabbed from behind in a bear hug.

"Try 'n hide from this, witch!" Mel said, squeezing her. Her arms were trapped by her sides, and she could feel her elbows being pressed hard into her ribs. Her breathing became difficult. She started calculating her options of escape, but they were unnecessary. A gunshot from above caught Mel in the back, and his grip weakened. Annie broke free from his arms and swung around, leading with her right arm. The butt of her gun caught Mel in the jaw, and he reeled, mumbling curses.

Annie fired a bullet into his chest, but he didn't fall. Instead, he looked at her with hate-filled eyes and mouthed something. Annie fired again, and this time, Mel finally tumbled backwards into his chair and went limp.

Annie took a moment to make sure she'd done the brute in. Then she looked up at her new companion. "Thanks fer the help, lad," she said as she started reloading her gun.

"My pleasure, ma'am," he replied, tipping his hat. "I heard all this commotion an' had to check it out. I see four tough guys gangin' up on one lady, an' it didn't take me long to decide whose side I was on."

"Well, y'chose the roight one," Annie said, signaling to the badge on her vest. "Whoile Oi got yer attention, y' wouldn't happen t' know where a man named Elijah Corvis moight be hoidin', would ya?"

"Can't say that I..." He was cut off by a gunshot. The bullet caught him in the chest, and his grey shirt began to dampen. He put his hand to his heart, then pulled it away to see his own blood. He looked at Annie one last time before he fell to his knees, then finally slumped backwards to the floor.

Annie's gasp caught in her throat. She turned and saw, standing next to the bar table, a familiar man in a black trench coat blowing at the smoke coming off of his revolver.

"Hello again, Annie," Elijah Corvis said with a vile smirk.

Annie screamed a war cry as she opened fire on him, but he dove behind the bar before any shot could connect. Annie started towards the bar but stopped when Elijah popped up behind it. She instinctively raised her gun but halted her trigger finger when she saw that Elijah had a hostage. It was the bartender. He'd been hiding behind the bar table during the gunfight, instead of running away. It was a decision he probably regretted.

"Hold up there, girly," Elijah said. He held his gun under the bartender's chin. "You make one wrong move, an' the ol' barkeep here'll be askin' for a new head this Christmas. Drop it."

With a scowl on her face, Annie slowly lowered her revolver, then tossed it to the side. Elijah chuckled.

"Good girl. Now, you're gonna get on your knees and put your hands behind your head, and then you're gonna let me walk on out that front door and be on my merry way, and no one's gonna get hurt. Well, no one else, that is."

Annie stared at him, silently fuming. Elijah pressed the barrel of his gun deeper into the bartender's skin. Annie resentfully lowered herself down to her knees and put

her hands behind her head, never taking her eyes off of her enemy. Elijah sidestepped his way out from behind the bar and began moving towards the door, likewise keeping his eyes on Annie.

"Y' were here the whole toim?" Annie asked, turning herself to fully face Elijah.

"Yep," he said.

"Whoi didn't y' escape durin' the melee, then?"

Elijah took a few steps towards Annie and bent down to look her in the eyes.

"Because," he said, "I like to torment you. I know that, ever since I killed your daddy, you've been achin' to get your sweet little hands around my throat. And you always get so close, too, don't you? Like right now, here I am, not three feet in front of you, and you can't do a damned thing to me." He stood up straight again.

"And, you know, it just makes my day. All your fancy moves an' all your gunslingin' can't do you a bit a' good when I got someone's life in my hands like ol' barkeep here. I'm right in front of your face, and you know that you're so close, and yet so very far. It haunts you...it eats at you. And I love every minute of it."

Annie shot her wad of now-tasteless gum out of her mouth like a blow dart. It flew into Elijah's right eye, causing him to throw his head back and scream. Annie did a forward cartwheel, catching Elijah's gun with the heel of her left boot. It fired, but its aim had already been thrown off, and the bullet missed the bartender by more than a foot. Then the gun flew out of Elijah's hand, landing on a table and sliding off into a pile of broken glass.

Annie landed on her feet but quickly rolled into a backwards somersault. She planted her hands on the floor and elevated herself into a perfect handstand. She grabbed Elijah's head between her ankles, squeezed, and pulled him forward. He fell as if trying to perform a somersault, but his head collided with the floor. There was a thud, and when the rest of his body hit the ground, it didn't move. Annie raised herself to her feet, then knelt and put her hand around Elijah's neck. It wasn't broken and he still had a pulse. She smiled.

"What do y' think about moi 'fancy moves' now?" she asked aloud. She stood up with a look of confidence and relief.

"Why didn't ya kill 'im?" the bartender asked, coming up behind Annie. "After what he did to ya..."

"He's done croims t' others besoides me," Annie said. "He's got more t' answer for. He'll get what's comin' t' him, but it'll happen in the lawful way."

"How noble," a voice said. It startled Annie, because it sounded like Elijah's, but it came from beside her. She didn't have time to dwell on it, however, as she felt a hard blow to the back of her head, and the lights went out.

She awoke in a puddle of beer that was mixed with bits of glass and various food items. She slowly brought herself to her feet and wiped the muck off of her face. On the floor next to her was a body adorned in Elijah's trench coat. A wig of black hair had come off of its head, which was bald. Annie reached down and grabbed the mustache that was under its nose, tugging on it. It tore off with ease. The face beneath was not Elijah's.

Annie saw a bullet wound in the man's chest. To his right was a bushy clump of hair, and next to that, an eye patch.

A fake beard? she thought. She took a moment to collect her thoughts, and then it hit her. That wasn't the barkeep, and this isn't Elijah.

Annie peeked behind the bar and saw Dusty's lifeless body pressed up against the table.

"Son of a whore," she hissed through her teeth. She'd been tricked. Elijah had been right in front of her the whole time, disguised as the bartender. He'd had a henchman pretend to be him, then disposed of him when he was no longer needed. It had all been a game, and she'd fallen for it.

Why?

Because he likes to torment me, Annie answered herself.

She walked out through the squeaky double doors of the now-empty saloon and into the setting sunlight. Her horse was gone, of course. Elijah had probably sold it off already. She stood on the front step and sighed, watching the shape of the sun burrow its way into the horizon. A moment later, though, a smile slid across her face. She took a deep breath and looked towards the sky.

"Fool me once," she said. "Shame on you."

She stepped down and began walking towards the sunset.

Justified

The wind howled through the cool, dry evening air. In the distance, the sound of an old pick-up's motor chugged up an empty gravel drive. The sun was slowly sinking behind the majestic Nebraska sandhills, putting on a beautiful light show of oranges, pinks, and robust reds for the ranchers and animals that lived in the desolate hills. The sandhills rolled on for eternity, isolating the area in an aura of peace and magic. The sweet and sickening smell of cow manure perfumed the area like incense. A gruff-looking man drove the old pick-up into a small ranch compound and parked in front of a small, trailer-like home. An old cow dog slowly jumped out the back of the truck, landed in pain from his arthritis, and staggered to where his water bowl lay in wait. The man got out of the truck, walked to the front of the house, and opened the door.

Sally had been cooking all day it seemed. Her dry, stringy blond hair turned grayer with each passing day. She was petite but sturdy, and she possessed an air of strength, but it was a strength that was slowly being worn away. The crags of age framed her face in a way that made her seem much older than she was. She had to cook three meals a day and have them ready by the time Edgar arrived home from tending to the cattle, the hay, and other work on the small ranch. Tonight, however, she was running a little late on dinner because she had forgotten to turn on the oven when she put the chicken in. She heard Edgar's truck roll up to the front of the house and began to panic because the chicken still had another twenty minutes to go.

Edgar thunked his heavy boots through the door in typical fashion, a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, and stood silent in the kitchen. Edgar was not the sort of person anyone would want to mess with. At six feet three inches, he was a beast of a man with large arms and a barrel chest that heaved up and down with anger. His weathered face was etched with deep wrinkles from long days in the sun, and his skin resembled the tanned leather of the cows he tended. His piercing green eyes always seemed wild with rage and untouchable by reason. Though he was not unattractive, there was something about him that was extremely unnerving, and most men and women wanted nothing to do with him.

Edgar stared at the empty place settings on the kitchen table. His temper boiled over like a pot of water left too long on the stove. "God damn it Sally, why can't you ever have dinner ready on time?!"

Sally backed up against the kitchen counter in fear. In her soft, kindly voice, she said, "I accidentally forgot to turn the oven on and I got th..."

A giant hand quickly seized her by the hair and threw her to the floor. She didn't make a sound. She laid there not moving, waiting for the next blow, which soon followed. She ducked and held her head as she curled tightly into a ball on the floor, as she had done too many times before. Edgar barraged Sally with swift kicks and hard punches until his breathing became strained and he had to sit down in his ratty, torn recliner. He continued to yell at her in a booming voice which made the trailer shudder as if chilled by the cool air of the sandhills. Sally laid there and waited for the timer to go off on the chicken. When it finally did, she quietly set the table and sat down in her seat.

Sally was bleeding from the mouth and had received several hard kicks in her side. She was struggling to keep from showing Edgar how much pain she was in. She cautiously winced every time she breathed deeply. She had made up her mind a long time ago to never show him the pain he caused her again.

The meal would have been the envy of anyone, homemade roast chicken with loaded mashed potatoes and broccoli and, for dessert, homemade brownies. Edgar slopped it into his mouth with the ferocity of a pig that hadn't eaten in weeks. He belched and callously wiped the food that stained his shirt to the floor. Sally picked at her meal and had a few bites. Edgar kicked the old wooden dining chair to the wall and returned to his recliner without a word of gratitude. Sally cleared the table, put the leftovers on a plate, and wrapped it with plastic wrap. She put on her jacket and said to Edgar, "I'm going to feed Agnes."

"Wish that ol' bat would kick one of these days soon," Edgar replied coldly.

Sally walked out into the pitch of the night and found her way to the gravel drive that led to Agnes's house. Her husband had owned and operated the ranch until he died suddenly of a heart attack. Her children had never wanted to work the ranch, so Agnes had hired Sally and Edgar as cow hands nearly ten years before. Agnes lived in the grand farmhouse of the ranch by herself. The house had three stories and had been built in the early 1900s. It was furnished with the furniture that came with it when Agnes's husband's father built it. It looked a little worse for wear, but it was sturdy and impressive-looking. The blue-grey paint was chipping off, and some of the windows were broken and boarded up. To anyone else, it might have looked haunted, but to Sally, it was a refuge—a grand old house full of beauty, love, and warmth.

Sally walked through the silence of the sandhills. She had always loved it out there. She'd lived there all of her life. There were a billion stars in the sky, and the Milky Way flowed overhead like sweet cream from the heavens. It was the quietest place in the world. The only sounds were the drone of the nearby highway and an occasional bellow of a mother cow looking for her calf. In the distance, a coyote howled, and

Edgar's old cow dog answered. Sally could already hear Agnes's television show cutting through the silence. Agnes, being nearly deaf, always had the television on full blast. Sally could hear the familiar sound of crowds cheering and the host of *Wheel of Fortune* talking. Sally reached the front door and walked right in.

She found Agnes on the couch with her TV tray poised in front of her, ready for the meal Sally had brought. Agnes stared intently at the television and hadn't noticed Sally yet. Agnes was the smallest old woman that Sally had ever seen. She stood barely four foot five inches tall, but Sally guessed that if Agnes could stand straight, she might gain a couple inches or so. Agnes was a fragile-looking creature; she was very pale, and her blue veins showed through her translucent skin. If Sally looked at Agnes's face long enough, she could clearly see the structure of her skull. Sally took her into town once a week to get her thin white hair washed and styled. Sally never could figure out how Agnes kept it looking like it had just been done all week, knowing that Agnes never washed it. Sally put on a happy face, and in an overly cheerful and loud voice, she said, "Hi Agnes, honey, I have your dinner, dear."

Agnes turned from the television to look at Sally. Agnes lived in her own little world where nothing was wrong and everyone told the truth. She saw the blood that had dried on Sally's chin and said in a voice that sounded like it belonged to a child with the shakes, "O'me deary, yer bleed'n from yer mouth hun. Le'me git cha somthin for it."

She stood up with what looked like a great effort, grabbed her walker, and hobbled into the kitchen to get Sally a damp paper towel before she could protest. Agnes returned by the time Sally had set up her dinner on the old 1950s TV tray. Agnes handed her the paper towel, and Sally cleaned up her face.

"Wha happ'n this time, hun? Did ya bite yer lip agin?" Agnes asked unassumingly.

"Oh, no, dear, I turned into an open kitchen cabinet, and the corner caught me just right," replied Sally.

Anyone else would have seen through the lie, but Agnes accepted it without question. Sally had been beaten next door for ten years now, and Agnes had never once suspected it. She was convinced Sally was as clumsy as she claimed to be. "Ya mus be more careful hun, yer really gonna hurt yerself one dees days."

Sally sat down with Agnes as she ate her dinner and watched the end of *Wheel of Fortune*. Then Sally helped her up the creaky old stairs to get changed for bed. Sally had been taking care of Agnes for years. Sally liked caring for the kindly old woman. She was appreciated by Agnes, and it gave her some sense of worth in her life. Agnes was the only reason Sally could think of for staying alive sometimes. She knew Edgar would take advantage of Agnes if he got a chance. Sally felt like her protector.

Sally changed Agnes into a cotton night gown and helped her into bed. Agnes asked Sally to hand her the Bible and to move the table lamp closer.

"Agnes," Sally said in a whisper, "would you mind saying a little prayer for me tonight? I think I need it."

"Aw, hunny, I said a pray'r fer ya every night since ya been take'n care of this old body." Agnes smiled sweetly at Sally and continued, "Yer my gurl, my dotter. I always pray fer my chil'n."

After all Sally had been through in her horrible life with Edgar, just to hear Agnes say that made Sally feel, maybe for the first time, that she was worth something. Sally kissed Agnes on the cheek and gave her a little hug, almost afraid she would break the frail old woman. Sally walked down the dark and desolate gravel drive back to the hell of her life with that new and unfamiliar feeling. She snuck past Edgar, who was asleep, into her bed in the guest room and went to sleep with the door locked, smiling for what seemed like the first time in her life.

John Standard lived about thirty miles further outside of town than Sally, Agnes, and Edgar, but he knew them well. John was still a large man for his age. At sixty-two, he was on the edge of retirement, but he had no intentions of doing so. He loved to work the ranch, taking care of the cows and horses. Although he was getting old, he still did most of the work on his ranch, only employing two cow hands. He was on his way into town around lunch time to get some feed for the upcoming winter when he looked to his right and saw Edgar's tractor in the middle of a field by a hay stack. Connected to the tractor was a stack mover to move the hay stacks closer to where the cows would be over the winter. The tractor was running, but John could not see Edgar, and he thought that this was odd. He pulled into the two parallel dirt tracks made by generations of pick-ups and entered the field where the tractor was.

John parked on the dirt trails and decided to walk the short distance to the tractor. He didn't think his town pick-up could go off-road, and he was in no mood to change a tire that afternoon. He walked quickly towards the tractor, calling out for Edgar, but he got no response. It was eerily quiet. There was no noise except for the roar of the tractor engine. John had a terrible feeling in the pit of his stomach; something was very wrong. As he got closer, a horrific smell entered his nostrils. It wasn't anything that one would normally smell on a ranch. John had long ago become accustomed to the smell of cow pies and dead cows, but this smell was different. As he rounded the front of the tractor, he made a sickening discovery. He turned and ran back to his pick-up, crying hysterically and vomiting on himself several times. He got in his truck and sped towards town in shock, driving to the sheriff's home just fifteen miles

up the road. He screamed prayers the whole way there and nearly lost control of his car twice.

The whole of the police and sheriff's staff were soon out in the field where John had discovered the shredded body parts of Edgar. There were six officers in all, and all were horrified by the scene. There was blood everywhere, as well as bits and pieces of Edgar. Most of Edgar's body lay crushed and unrecognizable under and to the side of the stack mover. Sheriff Sacs was in charge of figuring out what had happened. He walked around the tractor and stack mover. The tractor was still running and so was the empty stack mover. He walked around to the back of the stack mover and at looked a small opening that was still occasionally spitting out bits of Edgar as a piece of his pant leg twisted and spun wildly around a bolt on the shaft. Snapped cables spun freely in the wenchers nearby. The opening was no more than four inches wide. Edgar had been pulled through and spit out the other side. The Sheriff couldn't imagine a more horrible death, but he couldn't bring himself to feel sorry for Edgar. He'd seen Sally's black eyes and scars.

As he looked down around the tractor, something gold and shiny caught his eye. The other officers were still standoffish, and none of them noticed when Sheriff Sacs bent down, picked up the object, and stuck it discreetly in his pocket.

Sally was in the kitchen of her trailer cooking lunch when there came a loud, startling knock at the door. Sally jumped and then walked to the front door and opened it. Sheriff Sacs stood stoically at her door with his hat off. There were two other officers behind him, both pale as sheets and a little green around the gills. Sally's eyes were wide as she said, "Why, Sheriff, what brings you here?"

"You had better take a seat, Sally," replied the Sheriff.

Sally invited the three officers in and offered to get them some coffee, but they all refused. Sally moved nervously to the couch, and they all sat down.

"Sally," the Sheriff started, "John Standard was driving by your east pasture when he saw Edgar's tractor running without Edgar."

"What happened? Is Edgar okay?" asked Sally with what seemed like concern.

"Well, no, he's not," replied the Sheriff. "He's dead, Sally."

Without missing a beat, Sally asked, "How d-did it happen?"

"As far as I can tell, his pant leg got caught in the power take off shaft of the stack mover, and he was pulled through. It was a pretty horrible scene, Sally. I'm so sorry for your loss." The Sheriff was genuinely sorry for her as he looked deep into her gray eyes.

Sally sat stunned at the news she was hearing. She began to cry hysterically. The Sheriff sat next to her and listened to her cry. Her cries sounded in a way like laughter. The Sheriff stood up and looked around the trailer to give Sally some time to calm down. He noticed that Edgar's shotgun was propped up against the front door, not in its usual spot on the gun rack in the garage. He went over to pick it up. He smelled the end of the gun; it smelled of gunpowder. He thought this curious, but then he turned to his fellow officers and asked them to excuse themselves and go back to town to see that Edgar made it to the mortuary. The two officers left, and Sheriff Sacs again sat down next to the grieving Sally.

The Sheriff held Sally for a moment, and then he gently took her chin and turned her face so he could look her in the eyes. Her eyes did not show any kind of real grief. They were not red or swollen from crying, and they seemed more alive than the Sheriff had ever seen them before. He reached into his pocket, still staring into Sally's eyes.

"I found this out by Edgar," he said as he pulled a tiny golden wedding ring from his pocket. It was too small to belong to Edgar, and Sally was not wearing hers. He put it in Sally's hand and closed his hand around hers with the ring tucked tightly inside.

"Sally, I don't care what really happened."

Sally looked more stunned than she had all day. Her heart beat faster, and her breath grew short. Her face turned white with fear, and she began to open her mouth, but the Sheriff stopped her.

"As far as I'm concerned, Edgar's pants got caught on a bolt on the power take off shaft. He was a moron and stuck his leg where it shouldn't have been. It's his own damn fault. I hope that you can go on with your life now. If you want I can put an ad out for a couple of cow hands to help you and Agnes out."

Sally was stupefied. Her mouth gaped open as she stared unbelieving at the Sheriff. *He knows*, she thought, *He knows about Edgar beating me*. She tried to speak, but all that came out was an inaudible series of stutters and bits of words. Then she took a deep breath. "Bless you."

The Sheriff gave her a tight hug and a kiss on the cheek. "You had better get that food to Agnes. She'll be hungry now."

Sally walked down the gravel drive towards Agnes's as the Sheriff pulled away into a cloud of dust left by the other officers' car. She was free. She turned to look at the sandhills. They were so big that they seemed to roll on forever, creating a sea of yellowing prairie grass in contrast to the lightest blue sky she had ever seen. It was heaven out there, and for the first time, she really felt it. She breathed in deep and listened to the silence once more before walking to Agnes's.

Bearman

Garan walked into the smoke-choked, lightless bar and took a look around. *Miscreants, all of them*, he thought, and then he chuckled. *Just like me*. These ignorant fools spent all of their hard-earned money in this bar, their lives so dull and uninspiring that they had nothing to look forward to at the end of the day but drinking themselves into a mind-altering stupor.

Garan wished he had that luxury, not that he enjoyed imbibing alcohol, but he would like to be able to drop his guard every once in a while. As it was there weren't many Bearmen left in the world, and there were undoubtedly many bounty hunters who would like to cash in on the profit his hide would bring. And his daughter would receive a much worse fate.

As he scanned the room, he wished he was back in his youth, before the nomadic Bearmen had been decimated by the treacherous Alaruk. His people had always wandered the globe, bringing justice to the little man where none existed. Now, the Corporations owned everything, and the Alaruk owned the Corporations. The Corporates must have gotten tired of the Bearmen, always refusing to let the scaled fiends walk over the poor and defenseless of the world. They had secretly amassed an army and smashed the few Bearmen outposts that existed, effectively bringing the Bearmen to extinction. Garan had no idea how many of his people were left, but besides his daughter Vuma and his now deceased mate Niral he hadn't seen another individual of his species in close to five years. He knew there were more out there—he had heard the stories—but the Corporate Alaruk raised the bounty on Bearmen's heads every day.

Garan spotted his contact sitting in a booth in the back right-hand corner of the room. Typically, the light over the table was broken, making the already dark room just that much darker. The contact also had his hood pulled over his face, and his hands were hidden below the table, effectively disguising his race and appearance.

Dropping his right hand to the gun strapped to his belt, Garan moved warily towards the booth and slid in to the opposite side of his contact. He didn't like this position, his back turned towards the room, but the contact left him no choice.

"Are you Bluejay?" Garan asked, his right hand still on the butt of his gun as he rapped the claws of his left hand on the tabletop.

* * *

Jacob Tanner leaned back, looking out through the hood at the massive claws as they tapped the table impatiently. He had never seen a Bearman personally, but he knew by reputation what to expect: large in stature and girth, a body covered by shaggy brown fur, dark intelligent eyes, and, of course, those too-long claws. But Garan was exceptional. Even while sitting, he would probably dwarf Tanner, and every tap of those claws left a divot in the wooden table

"Yes, you can call me Bluejay," Tanner responded.

He brought his hands up from his lap, holding a rather full-looking brown cloth bag. He flicked the bag with his finger, and something metallic jingled inside. Garan raised one heavy eyebrow as he studied the bag.

"One hundred pieces?" He asked.

"Yes," Tanner nodded, "If you can do the deed."

"What deed?"

"There is a certain...person, in the northeast corner of town," he smiled. "I want this person eliminated. Quickly, silently, and without any trace back to me."

"I don't even know who you are. How would it get back to you?" Garan shook his head. "And besides that, I'm not an assassin. I only kill if I have to, if someone is in danger."

"Don't give me that moral high-ground bulltoxin, it's time to face the facts here, Garan!" He whispered loudly, "Your people are limited in number, and you know you need this money. You are a mercenary now, plain and simple!"

Garan closed his eyes and snarled, pulling his lips back over sharp, shining white teeth. His claws scratched deep into the table, and for a moment, Tanner thought he had made a mistake in angering the giant Bearman. Then, Garan hissed his breath out between his teeth and opened his paw up, pushing his palm against the table.

"Tell me about the person I am supposed to...eliminate."

Tanner brought out a small, pyramidal crystal and set it on the table. After he pushed a button, a three-dimensional image of a small, dark-haired woman wearing a brown robe sprang into the air above the crystal. The woman wasn't young, but she wasn't old either, and her brown eyes seemed to shine with a kindness that Tanner could see got Garan's attention.

"This is Marla Pran, a priestess at the Noventa Church..." Before Tanner could continue, Garan cut him off.

"You want me to assault a church? You are a mad man."

"You want to know who is mad? Marla Pran!" Tanner pushed the button and

withdrew the crystal back into his robe. "She leads that church; under her guidance, her clerks have robbed passing caravans, stealing food and clothes. She robs the trains that send our tax back to the Alaruk! Do you know what will happen to this valley if the Corporates don't get their goods?"

"She only takes food and clothes? Why?"

"That's not important! The fact is that she steals from the Corporations, and she must be stopped! Do you want the job or not?"

* * *

Garan groaned and looked around. No one at any of the other tables had seemed to take notice of their conversation, so he looked back into the hooded darkness. He didn't want to do this. The fact that he was even considering murdering someone for money turned his stomach into knots. But his daughter Vuma was sleeping back at his den, and with that bag of gold, he could afford to buy a more advanced automated defense system. But his people had always been protectors of the innocent. They only moved on people when there was proof that the law had been broken. This sounded to Garan like a personal vendetta, and he realized as growl rose up in his throat that he was going to accept the job.

"All right, I'll do it." Garan shook his head. "How do I find you?"

"You don't." Garan still couldn't see Bluejay's face, but he could tell the man was smiling. "I'll find you."

Garan got up and started to walk away.

"Oh, and if you decide that perhaps you don't want to do this job," Bluejay said, "Well, let's just say that we know where your daughter is right now."

Garan stopped, whirled around on his heel, and, in one smooth motion, pulled his gun and pushed the tip of the barrel into the hood until it contacted flesh. Garan growled.

"If you ever threaten my daughter again," Garan pulled the hammer back, until the loud, audible click, "I will put a bullet right between your eyes."

Garan withdrew the gun and uncocked it, then stuck it back in the holster. He spun again and strode out into the night.

* * *

Garan walked down the dark alley, a low growl rumbling in the back of his throat. His baggy brown pants were tucked into his leather boots, and the straps of his iron armor chest plate were cutting into his shoulders. He was armed to the teeth, literally and figuratively. His gun was strapped to his right hip, a long, broad sword to

his left, and four daggers were tucked into his belt behind his back. Add that weaponry to his impressive claws and canines, and he was ready for a brawl.

Physically at least, but his mind wasn't in it at all. The growl grew a little louder, and he bared his teeth. He had never met Marla Pran, but the fact that she seemed to only take food and clothes from the tax caravans bothered him. It was exactly the type of thing his people had done before they had been crushed, robbing the rich to give to the poor. The greed and avarice of the Alaruk had produced a lot of poor and not much rich, which put them at immediate odds with the Bearmen, who believed in hard and honest work.

A soft, muffled cry broke into his thoughts. His right ear twisted around atop his skull and found the location of the cry, but he didn't need his nose to smell that a crime was being committed down a side alley a few paces from him. He paused. He had a job to do, and he couldn't afford to be sidetracked. He almost began walking again, but something else caught his heart and froze him in place.

"...help..."

It was barely audible, but Garan knew what he had to do, and disgust raged up his throat at the thought that he had almost walked on without helping. He wasn't a mercenary; he helped the little person.

He started sprinting and turned a corner. About fifty paces from him, Garan saw an older human man lying on his back in the middle of the alley. He couldn't see it, but Garan could smell the blood. Pushed up against a chain-link fence was a young woman, held on her back by a young man. Garan could see the woman's blonde hair splayed out on the concrete like a balloon of yellow paint had struck the ground. She had her palms pushed against the man's shoulders, pushing against him hard, but he was far too strong for her. He slapped her and then punched her hard in the stomach. She coughed and cried. He was too strong for her, but not too strong for Garan.

The young man didn't see it coming; suddenly, his face was violently introduced to the sole of Garan's boot, driving his head hard against the fence. Garan reached down and grabbed the human by the back of the neck, taking great care not to puncture the man's pencil-neck with his claws. Garan lifted him up, looking him in the face, one side of which was already swelling up.

"Go home and pray to whatever god you idolize that you never see me again!"

With a flick of his wrist, Garan launched the scrawny human ten feet down the alley. He bounced hard twice, then scrambled to his feet and took off, disappearing around a corner a short while later. Garan glanced down at the woman and saw her top had been ripped open, so he looked away in order to avoid seeing her vulnerability.

"Are you all right?"

"Y-yes, thank you."

"It was no problem." He looked down at the old man. "Is this your father?"

"Yes. Is...is he..."

With one sniff, Garan could tell the man was not dead. "No, your father lives. Two blocks east of here is a small, dark building. My friend Th'Jahno is a healer, and he will help your father."

"Thank you." She stood next to him, barely as tall as his chest. "Who are you?"

His growl rumbled in the back of his throat again. He thought about telling her, but he wasn't sure how his night would end, and he didn't want his daughter to be ashamed of the deplorable actions he was about to undertake. He looked down at the woman.

"I am The Bearman. Now tend to your father."

* * *

Marla Pran's church sat at the corner a few dozen paces from where Garan stood. It was neither small nor very big; it wasn't shabby, but it wasn't outrageously decorated, either. Brown wooden slabs made up the walls, and it was roofed by thatched straw. There was no door, just an open hole covered by strings of beads.

Garan folded his arms across his chest, tapping his right index claw against his breastplate. He saw two men sitting near the entrance to the building, trying to look nonchalant, but he could tell these men were guards. They wore the same type of brown robe he had seen on Marla Pran in the image the Bluejay had shown him.

He leaned his head back against the corner of the building he was leaning on and looked up at the stars. He spotted the star Oropos, the alleged home of his ancestors, and said a quiet prayer. Then he pushed off the building and began walking towards the church, his right arm dropping to the gun holstered at his hip.

One of the guards saw him coming and stood, placing himself directly between Garan and the doorway.

"Peace be with you this night, brother."

"Peace." Garan pulled his gun, jabbed the barrel between the man's ribs, and squeezed the trigger. A loud bang echoed through the otherwise silent night. As the man's corpse slid to the ground, Garan spun around, bringing his gun around quickly, and pulled the trigger, nailing the other guard before he was able to hop out of his chair.

Garan dove through the entryway and rolled as he hit the floor. He spun and came up in a crouch. Garan leveled his weapon at a man standing in front of an

altar and pulled the trigger, blasting him on top of the altar. A door slammed open to Garan's left, and he pulled the trigger, once, twice. The first bullet struck home, dropping a man to his stomach, but the second went wide as another man rolled into the room through the door.

Garan saw the man spin, his hand hidden in his robe, trying to free a weapon. Before he got the chance, Garan had crossed the room, grabbing the man in his left paw and squeezing his claws through his opponent's face. The man screamed and clutched at Garan's wrist. Then Garan pushed the barrel against the man's chest and pulled the trigger, and the struggling stopped.

Garan dropped the body and holstered his gun. It only had six shots, and they were spent. He walked through the door and quickly whipped a dagger out from behind his back. With a flick of his wrist, he launched it into the throat of a man crouched behind a table. He ran forward and kicked the table hard, smashing it back against the wall and pinning the dead man and another man hidden back there into place.

Reaching behind his back again, Garan pulled two more daggers, one in each hand. Two men came at him, each one armed with a dagger. He fought them each off but suffered several cuts to his hands and wrists and a particularly nasty gash across his left cheek before he planted the daggers hilt-deep into the guts of his attackers. He pulled his last dagger and chucked it at the last man in the room, entrenching it in the man's shoulder. He screamed as he fell to the floor, pulling the blade from his arm and grabbing the bleeding wound.

Garan looked around. There were no doors other than the one he had come in, and no windows, yet Marla Pran was not here. He looked over at the wounded man, then at the man who was pinned between the wall and the table.

"Where is Marla Pran?"

"She's not here, you monster!"

Garan grimaced. Before he had shot the first guard, he would have protested at being called a monster, but now it seemed appropriate. He had killed, and for what? She apparently wasn't even here. He sniffed once, then again, and noticed a scent he had missed earlier. A vague hint of burning oak wafted to his nostrils, and he knew it did not belong to any of the men he had killed. He walked over to the wounded man and grabbed him by his shoulder, squeezing it hard. The man screamed as Garan lifted him off his feet.

"I smell something that should not be here. Is it Marla Pran?"

"I...I don't..."

"Don't tell him anything!"

Garan dropped the wounded man and walked over to the man pinned behind the table.

"I see. You are a brave one, aren't you?" He kicked the table again, smashing it against the man and forcing him even closer to the wall. "You have information that I want. Give it to me, and I promise neither of you will come to any more harm."

"Burn in hell, you animal!"

"I will, but not before I send you ahead to scout it for me..."

"Don't! Don't kill him. I'll tell you!"

"No! Don't tell him, Gabe!"

Garan turned and walked back to the wounded man, the one called Gabe; Gabe scrambled to his feet, cradling his injured arm against his body. He looked over at the trapped man.

"It's no use, Derik. If this was meant to be, then it was meant to be. If it wasn't, then he is in for a rude surprise." He looked up at Garan. "There is a stone in the wall next to the door. Push it; it will open up a staircase in the floor."

Garan looked Gabe in the eyes, and Gabe looked right back. With a nod, Garan turned, moved over to the indicated stone, and pushed it in. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then, a loud grinding noise began as the stones in the floor ripped apart. A thin column of steam hissed through the gaping hole as stairs rose up from the darkness below and snapped into position level with the floor.

"Wise decision," Garan said as he looked at Gabe, slowly walking to the staircase. He looked down the well. At the bottom of the stairs was a thick, wooden door; a pale, golden light leaked out around the edges of the door, casting the only light in the dark stairwell.

With a sniff, Garan slowly walked down the stairs, drawing his large sword from its sheath on his left hip. He grabbed the ring that served as the door's handle, pulled it open, and quickly stepped inside.

He had to bite his lip to keep from gasping. This isn't just a secret chamber, Garan thought, this is a throne room! The room in which he found himself was at least twice the height of the church upstairs and easily four times as large around. Two rows of thick marble pillars stretched along the length of the room, each one with two burning torches illuminating various areas of the room. The walls were decorated with scarlet, purple, and gold tapestries, and forest green rugs covered up most of the stone floor.

At the far end of the room was a short, squatty table that dominated that whole end of the room. One side of the table was clear, except for a map spread out on its surface; the other side held large, bulky bags he could only guess contained vast sums of gold.

Sitting over the map was Marla Pran. The crystal image Bluejay had shown him of her was fairly accurate. She was diminutive, with brown hair and a lighter brown robe. But when she looked at him, he realized that her beauty was far more apparent in person. Her face was colorless and pale, and her pink lips drew back in a smile as she stood.

"Ah," she said, "you must be Garan."

"How do you know my name?"

"I know many things." She slowly started walking towards him, and he realized her hands were concealed within her robe. He raised his sword into a guard position between him and her, and her smile grew a little wider. "You are a skilled warrior, indeed. I can see why Tanner would enlist your aid in squashing our little organization here."

"Who? I don't know a Tanner." He stepped back a bit, suddenly feeling very uneasy. "I know you have been robbing the Corporates. Believe me when I say I would love nothing more than to dance on the graves of the Corporate Alaruk, but I have a job to accomplish and a great deal of money to be earned by delivering your head on a platter to my client. I'm sorry, Marla Pran, but I have to kill you."

She shrugged. "Yes, I suppose if you don't, the Alaruk will kill your daughter."

"How do you know about that?"

"I know many things." She smiled at him again. "You don't need to do this, Garan. Together, we can protect your daughter and strike at the Alaruk. I have many resources, but you would make an extremely valuable asset in my organization."

"Lady, I was able to take out a dozen of your men single-handedly."

Garan smiled sympathetically. "Not exactly a ringing endorsement of your 'organization's' abilities."

"To be fair, my best soldiers are out on a mission right now. You dealt with some of my lesser warriors." Her smile turned from sweet to dangerous as she tightened her eyelids. "Besides that, your night is not over: you still have to kill me, and I promise that will not be an easy task."

"I'm up for the challenge..."

She shrugged again, this time her arms rising out from beneath her robe. It split and slid down her body, pooling around her feet. Garan's eyes widened as he

saw the form-fitting, shimmering white gown she wore. His surprise grew more as two large, leathery wings unfolded from around her shoulders and spread out behind her.

"A Gargoyle!" He gasped, his eyes darting from her wings to her gown to the two battle axes she held in her hands. "I didn't know there were any more of your kind!"

She frowned. "As far as I can tell, I'm the only one left."

He shook his head, not believing his good fortune. Bearmen and Gargoyles had been legendary allies in centuries past, until the greed of the Alaruk had doomed the Gargoyles, just as they would later eliminate the Bearmen as a threat to their economic rule. A Gargoyle behind the robberies meant people were still fighting the Alaruk, and Garan's heart soared as he realized he knew where he belonged.

Then his heart stopped and plunged like a rock dropped in the ocean. He had taken a job to eliminate the only like-minded cause he had found since his people had been obliterated. He snarled and clenched his eyes closed.

"AAAHHH! It's not fair!" He screamed at her. "Where have you been? I've degraded myself to the level of a mercenary trying to support my daughter, and now that I find you, I have to kill you or I'll lose everything!"

"It's not too late, Garan," she said. "Together, we can save your daughter. She will be safe here. And then we can take the fight to the Alaruk, we can end the Corporate stranglehold on our lands and bring them to justice for the genocide of our peoples."

"I can't!" He shook his head vigorously. "I have to complete my job!"

Garan jumped, launching himself across the room; he swung his sword at her, which she blocked with one of her axes. He saw her swinging the other axe towards him, and he stepped in closer, catching her wrist in his palm; then he continued his forward motion and bumped his iron-armored chest against her hard, knocking her backwards.

She rolled backwards, her grace and acrobatic skill catching Garan off-guard. As she rose off her haunches, she swept out a wing that engulfed him, smashing him against a pillar. He grunted and swung at her again. She blocked once more with an axe, and then she pivoted on her left heel, dropped to a knee, and elbowed him in the gut between his chest plate and navel. He grunted and stepped back, and she leapt up, kicking him right in the mouth. His jaws clicked shut, and stars exploded in his vision.

As his vision cleared, he realized he was lying flat on his back. He also realized she was leaping through the air, her axes swinging together to decapitate him. He lifted

his sword and blocked both axes. Then he lifted his foot and planted it in her stomach, lifting her over his head and flopping her on her back so they lay head-to-head next to each other. An instant later, they were both back on their feet, facing each other and breathing hard.

"I see the tales of your people's prowess in battle were not exaggerated, Garan," she said, bowing her head at him, "You are very good."

"The same can be said of you." He shook his head, "It's a shame one of us must die."

"My offer stands." She lowered her weapons to her thighs. "We do not have to keep fighting. We would be far more powerful allies than enemies."

"I know, but my people...we don't take assignments and then not do them, unless we die."

"Even when it means working for the Alaruk?"

"I don't understand." Garan frowned. "I'm working for a man named Bluejay, an employee for the city..."

"Jacob Tanner," she interrupted, "AKA Bluejay. A lieutenant in the city's militia, and a Corporate stockholder."

"What? He is with the Corporate Alaruk?"

"Why else do you think he is so interested in stopping my outfit?" she asked. "Did you think he wanted me gone just to preserve the city? He cares nothing of this town; his only interests are in his pocketbook!"

Garan closed his eyes, breathing hard. He clenched his jaws shut, and his breath hissed between his teeth. Silence reigned as he stood with his eyes closed, bringing his breathing back under control. After a few moments, he opened his eyes, looking right at her.

"You can help me get my daughter?"

"Absolutely," she smiled. "We'll do that right now, if you will put that sword away."

He grunted, flipped the blade around, and slid it into the sheath. He nodded at her. "Let's go."

* * *

As the sun started to rise in the east, Garan and Marla crouched behind a fallen log, looking into the cave that Garan had burrowed into to serve as his home. Marla's wings were wrapped tightly around her shoulders, completely concealing her body. Garan had his sword unsheathed; his gun was holstered, out of ammunition. Twenty paces from the mouth of the cave, four sentries were walking about, obviously

on patrol. Two more men stood at the mouth itself, and Garan judged from the voices echoing out of the cave that several more people were inside.

"I wish I had thought to bring more ammo," he said. "It would be nice if I could pick these guys off long range."

"Don't worry about what you could have done," Marla responded. "It is what it is. We have to deal with it now."

"You're right," he said. He started to rise from his crouch, but her firm hand on his wrist kept him from rising any further.

"What are you doing?"

"Dealing with it."

"You're just going to rush in there and attack them head on?" She frowned at him. "No, I have a better idea. Wait for the sun to rise, then we attack from the east. The sentries will have a hard time seeing us running in with the sun to our backs."

"Good idea," Garan nodded. "You sure we can do this? I could still kill you, you know."

"Trust me, your daughter is practically safe in my church already," she said. "Stay here; I'll let you know when to come out."

She turned and started climbing up a tree. He tried to follow her, but she was elusive, blending into the shadows very quickly. He leaned back against a tree, staring into the cave that was supposed to be his home. The audacity that he couldn't walk into his own den drove his blood to a boiling point. He had to fight to keep from growling out loud.

He looked up into the sky. The full moon stood nearly alone, the stars disappearing as the sun rose up in the east. Suddenly, he saw a shape swoop in front of the moon; then it veered down sharply, heading right for the mouth of his den. The shadow exploded downward, landing right on top one of the walking sentries. Garan stood and leapt over the log as Marla Pran stepped off the downed sentry.

"What happened to waiting for the sun?"

"I did. Look," she said, as she pointed over her shoulder.

As he looked, the sun rose magnificently into the sky, casting a warm golden light into the woods. He turned back, and together, he and Marla strode through the forest; he noticed a man stumbling over a log. Garan caught the man before he hit the ground, and lifted him off his feet. Staring the man in the eye, Garan shook his head as the man reached for the sword on his belt. The man's eyes were wide. The fear reflected in his pupils as they dilated.

"Shhh," Marla said, peering over Garan's shoulder. "Get out of here."

The man nodded. Garan pulled the man's sword from his belt and then dropped him to the ground. He stumbled backwards a bit, then stood, turned, and sprinted out of the small clearing. Garan turned the man's sword around and drove the blade into the ground till only the hilt was exposed. Then he looked at Marla and shrugged.

She smiled, and they strode on. Two men stood peering into the woods, their hands raised, casting a shadow over their eyes so they could see a little better. With the sun to their backs, Garan and Marla were able to practically walk right up to the two soldiers. A short scuffle ensued, and a few moments later Garan and Marla stood alone at the mouth of the cave.

"That was easy," Garan said, sniffing the air quietly. "Where are the other Alaruk guards?"

"I don't know." She cocked her head to the side, listening. "I don't hear anything anymore, either."

"That is because," a voice said behind them in the woods, "everyone is waiting. Each of you is a target."

Slowly, Marla and Garan turned and found a small, gangly man wearing a robe with the hood pulled back. His brown hair was extremely thin, with his hairline receding, and his hands were clutched together over his belly.

"Jacob Tanner," Marla Pran said. "Surprise seeing you here."

"Tanner...Bluejay?" Garan asked, looking between the man and the Gargoyle.

"That's right, you stupid beast," Tanner nodded. "I was your contact earlier this evening. I sent you to kill Marla Pran, not to join her and come seeking my blood."

"What can I say," he replied. "I'm not a big fan of assassinations. Where's my daughter?"

"Like I said," Tanner shook his head and smiled at Garan, "we knew where your daughter was, and when we realized you had betrayed us, we moved in on your den."

He looked to the side and nodded; Garan heard rustling as a large man seemingly appeared out of a tree, dragging a large, brown body in his left hand.

Not just a body, Garan realized, *MY DAUGHTER!* Tears welled up in his eyes as anguish pushed the bile up his throat. He snarled first, then his hand dropped to his sword hilt as he screamed. He took a step forward, but a pair of slender arms wrapped around his elbows, yanking his arms behind his back. Garan snarled louder as a foot kicked the back of each of his knees, dropping him to the ground. He turned his head and saw Marla behind him.

"YOU!" He shouted. "A trick? All of this?"

She laughed. "You think I was able to survive all of this time by actively opposing the Corporates? You are a fool."

Tanner laughed and pulled a dagger from inside his cloak. "You see, Garan, it is a good thing that your daughter is dead. She will be spared the anguish of living in a world where no one likes her, where her supposed allies would pin her arms behind her back before helping her fight her enemies."

"This world will not last," Garan muttered. Tanner walked up and grabbed the fur between his ears, pulling his head back and pushing the blade of the dagger against his throat.

Garan continued, "Someone will rise up against your tyranny. You will not always be able to hide behind your bags of gold and palace walls. The people will resist!"

"That day may come," Tanner nodded, "but that day is not today."

Garan looked over at his daughter's corpse, her body still and unmoving. As tears rolled down his furry cheeks, he whispered an apology for failing her.

Then Tanner slit his throat.

Grave Consequence

Old William Allister had been dead and buried for close to five years before Raymond Lloyd and Darren Stretch came into town on that dull autumn day. Lloyd and Stretch, of course, knew this, but it was of little deterrence to their premeditated task of robbing his grave. You see, it was no secret to the people of the small town of Anton Valley that Old William's body had been buried with a priceless artifact he'd brought back from the jungles of Africa around 1979. It was also no secret that, since that time, Old William had become very reclusive, coming out of his home at the end of the ancient Redfield Lane only on the rare occasion that he needed something from the drug store.

There were many rumors and theories floating around Anton Valley as to Old William's hermitage. Some said his journeys to the Dark Continent had warped his psyche beyond any mortal logic and salvation. Others claimed that he'd been possessed by a demon during a voodoo ritual, and then was subsequently sent back to America to plot the destruction of civilization. Still others thought that he hadn't come back alive at all, that the Old William whom very few saw outside of his house was really a ghost that was roaming the earth, trying to complete whatever unfinished business was keeping it from passing on into the afterlife. The latter theory was mostly dismissed when Old William's body was found on his front lawn one balmy summer morning, the victim of an apparent heart attack.

Not that any of these superstitions concerned Lloyd and Stretch. The only item they sought was the mysterious golden amulet that shared a wooden casket with the body of an old man's presumably-fragile corpse, the amulet that had been unearthed in some uncharted part of the Congo, or Zimbabwe, or wherever the old man had gone. They hadn't bothered to do much research. All they knew was that this most valuable of relics had been buried six feet under dirt, not per the wishes of any relative or a last will and testament, but because no one in the town had the courage to be within twenty feet of the thing...or of any other possession of William's. They'd even gone so far as to bury the old man and his discovery deep in the local forest instead of the cemetery.

It did not take Lloyd and Stretch long to find the grave, though it was so dark that not even the moon's light could breach the thick cloud covering. But their map and flashlights nearly did all the work for them. Once they happened upon the plot, they took their shovels and commenced digging. As they worked, Ray Lloyd happened to read Old William's tombstone, which was little more than a large rock with words

carved into it. Beneath the obligatory name and dates, there was a caption: "The Wise Will Remain Far From Here."

"What do you make of that?" Ray asked his companion.

"Bloody scare tactics," Darren Stretch replied. "Keep digging."

When they reached the coffin, it was Lloyd's duty to open it and obtain the bounty, while Stretch stood watch on the surface. Lloyd made short work of prying the lid off, for he was a burly man, and he quickly proceeded to startle Stretch with a sudden scream.

"What the hell was that about?" Stretch hissed. "You want us to get caught?"

"He was looking at me!" Lloyd said. "I opened it, and his eyes were right on me!"

Stretch peered down into the grave and saw that the corpse, with its gray hair and beard, hadn't appeared to decay much in five years. He also noted that its eyes were closed.

"You're paranoid," he said. "Now grab the thing, and let's get out of here."

Lloyd reached for the amulet lying on the body's chest with a shaking hand. It was golden, octagonal, and had a bright red gem in its center. He tapped it with one finger to test it, then quickly snatched it up and pressed himself back against the wall of dirt behind him. The body didn't move.

"You see?" Stretch said. "Now toss it up to me, and get out of there."

Lloyd threw the amulet to Stretch, then looked back at the coffin, planning to close it. He froze at the sight of Old William's face grinning back at him. Before he could react, two strong hands burst from the ground behind him, grabbing hold of his shoulders and yanking him back against the dirt. They were skeleton hands, and the tips of the fingers dug through his shirt and into his flesh. He screamed momentarily, before two more hands grasped his neck and squeezed his windpipe. Still more hands thrust their way through the earth to hold his arms and legs as he struggled. They all began to clench themselves, piercing Ray Lloyd's skin and drawing blood.

Darren Stretch didn't stay to see the final hand explode through his friend's abdomen, holding onto Lloyd's stomach like a baseball and allowing his insides to slide to the dirt. Instead, Stretch ran, cursing to himself in pure haste and terror, back the way he and Lloyd had come. He was still approximately thirty feet from the clearing when a tree branch swung down and struck him in the throat, then wrapped itself around his neck. Stretch clawed at it as it strangled him, but it was as strong as a hangman's noose. Thick tree roots sprung from the ground beneath him and enfolded his ankles. His wrists were likewise grasped by more tree branches, and it was in this

fashion that he was grotesquely quartered. The amulet, lying in the dirt and grass where he had dropped it, was in just the right spot to be drenched in a shower of his blood.

It was two-and-a-half weeks before the remains of Raymond Lloyd and Darren Stretch were discovered by a group of hunters who were more or less unfamiliar with the area. The youngest among them said that he would never forget the eerily-satisfied grin he beheld on the face of Old William's corpse before the coffin was closed...as if he'd been asleep and enjoying pleasant dreams.

Leaving It All Behind

I am the only one left.

I don't know how it happened. One morning I woke up, and no one else did. That morning burns in my memory even after several months have passed by.

When I woke up I leaned over to kiss my wife, Erica, as I do every morning. As soon as I pressed my lips to her cheek I could feel something was wrong. She was deathly cold. Literally.

"Erica!" I shouted as I grabbed her shoulders, shaking her, trying to wake her up.

When she didn't, I hopped out of bed, but my feet were tangled in the blankets and I hit the wood-paneled floor nose first. I kicked my feet free, and then ran out of my room, holding my nose as tears started streaming down my face.

I could feel the blood running out of my nose, but I paid it no mind. I ran into the living room and pulled my cell phone out of my jacket pocket, and dialed 911 as I ran back to Erica. I held the phone to my ear with my shoulder as I knelt by Erica, checking her pulse, and I listened to the phone ring...and ring...and ring.

That phone rang for five minutes with no answer, before I spiked it to the floor in frustration, shattering the device. I ran back to the living room to pick up the house phone, and dialed 911 again, and still no answer.

"What the hell is going on?" I was frantic, trying to find a way to save my wife.

I turned the phone off and dropped it as I approached the door; I unlocked it and yanked it open, almost pulling it off the hinges as I sprang outside.

"Help! Somebody help me!" I was desperate; I didn't know how to save my wife.

I ran across the street to my buddy Luke's house, Luke and I had been friends since middle school, so I didn't knock, I just went right in.

"Luke, Sarah! Something horrible has happened!" I walked down a hall and turned into their living room, "I need to use your ph..." I stopped short as I walked into the living room. "Oh no."

Lying in front of the couch was my best friend's three year old daughter Kayleigh on her belly. I just stood there for a moment, unbelieving; the only sound in the house was the cartoons on the TV.

"Oh no, Kayleigh!" I knelt beside her and scooped the little girl in my arms, I lifted her up onto the couch but I knew she was gone. She was cold, just like Erica had been.

I stood up and slowly walked backwards out of the room, towards the kitchen. I stopped when my feet touched the cold, linoleum panels of the kitchen floor, and turned around. Luke and his wife Sarah were sitting slumped over at the table, puddles of milk and cereal around their faces. They had just dropped dead during breakfast.

I left the house and stood on their front porch, looking around. Normally at this time in the morning people were going to work, but the only car I saw had crashed into a telephone pole. I was suddenly feeling very queasy as I walked towards the vehicle. It didn't look like it had hit the pole very hard, there wasn't much damage. When I got to the driver's side door, I looked in and found my neighbor Tom hunched over on the floor underneath the steering wheel. I didn't bother to check for a pulse, I knew he was dead.

I walked back to my house, dragging my feet, dreading what I knew I would find, but hoping against hope that I would wake up and be rid of this nightmare. I walked into the house, past the living room and turned left down the only hall in our small, 2-bedroom house. I stopped at the door across the hall from my room, and slowly pushed the door open, and went in.

The room was painted sky blue, race cars and clowns riding unicycles adorned the border at the top of the walls. Dominating the room was a race car shaped bed, and lying in the middle of that bed was my five year old son Gabriel. He was dressed in his green pajamas, with his blankets twisted around his feet. He tossed and turned; like father, like son.

There was no question in my mind as I looked at him, his chest wasn't rising and falling. He just lay there, so peaceful. My knees buckled as tears once again swelled in my eyes.

"No, no, no Gabriel. Please no," I began to cry as I fell to my knees. I pressed my forehead to his arm as I cried uncontrollably.

Later that day I went to the police station. It was surreal driving through town, car after car either spun out in ditches or drove right into telephone poles or other cars. I tried to help the people in the first few cars I found, but the occupants of every vehicle were dead.

I found the same situation at the police station. Officers were collapsed in hallways, or slumped over at desks. All dead with no warning. I started hyperventilating. *How can I be the only one alive in this whole city? How did this happen?* I asked myself as I raced back to my home.

When I got home I tried to use the phone again. I called everyone I knew in the city, all I got were answering machines. I called some family I had in Utah, and I almost broke down crying again when all I got were answering machines.

"Hey, it's Jake," I said when my Grandma's machine picked up, "I don't know what's happening, some sort of catastrophe. If anyone is there, please pick up!" I waited for a few minutes, "Alright, well, hopefully I'll talk to you later Grandma. I love you," I had to bite my lip a moment, as the tears threatened to pour down my face, "Good bye."

That night I couldn't sleep, so I sat up on my couch all night watching TV. It really dawned on me that the whole country was gone when all the late night shows didn't come on. No Jay, Dave, or Conan.

"There all dead," I said to myself, "I'm the only one alive."

I started laughing. Not from mirth or any kind of enjoyment, but I didn't know how to react. My wife, my son, my family and friends...All gone, I thought.

* * *

The telephone woke me up the next morning. I groaned and rolled over on the couch, and looked at the clock, it said 6:38 AM.

"Who calls at six thirty?" I snarled as I buried my face into the couch cushion. Then I started wondering why I was sleeping on the couch, and then the events of the previous day rushed back to me. I shot up off the couch and jumped over the back, scrambling to the still ringing phone.

"Hello?" I shouted as I slapped the phone to my ear, "Who's there? Someone alive?"

All I heard was a weird chuckling on the line, and I held my breath as I tried to listen to what the voice said.

"Hm hm hm," the dry, cackling voice said, "You are wondering what happened to everyone."

It wasn't a question, but a statement. When I first picked up the phone I was elated, I thought I had found another living person, but with that message I knew I wasn't talking to another person, I was talking to a murderer.

"Who is this?" I shouted.

"Hm hm hm," the voice laughed, "Your answers are in Chicago."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, but I heard the other line click, and then the busy tone. I slammed the phone down on its base and screamed, "Dammit! What the hell does that mean?"

I looked down at the phone for a while, rage boiling inside of me. I was wondering, *who was this person? Why did he call me?*

But then an image of my wife, her head lying on the pillow with her blue eyes closed, flashed in my mind, and an indomitable sorrow flowed up from my guts. I

couldn't believe it, so I had to go look at her in our bedroom, and at our son lying in his room. I had to see if maybe I had dreamt the whole deal. But when I looked at my wife, she looked exactly the same.

"Duh, she's dead," I muttered, speaking to no one but myself, "She'll never move again." I took a deep breath, "I have to stop talking to myself, I'm going crazy."

I smiled at how pretty she looked. Ever since Gabriel had been born she had been complaining about how pudgy she had gotten. The last thing I had told her was that she still looked gorgeous to me. Her golden blond hair was spread out on the pillow; it looked like a halo around her head.

I spent that morning burying my wife and son in a grave in the back yard. It sounds morbid, but I wanted to pay my family their final respects, and I didn't know how to do that except with a funeral. When I finished I realized my friend Luke and his family were still lying in their house, so I spent the afternoon burying them in their backyard. It also gave me a lot of time to think: of my former life, my life from this point forward, and of course, the phone call. I couldn't believe he would have the audacity to call and make riddles at my expense. For the most part, I tried to block it out.

* * *

The next few weeks were difficult. I almost killed myself several times, but I didn't have the guts to do it. Instead, I drove around town. A lot. At first I just went to my friend's and families houses, when I found them dead I'd bury them like I had my family. After a week of that I started going into random houses, grocery stores, gas stations, hoping I would find someone alive. Before everyone died, I hadn't been a real sociable type. But when I was alone, I realized how much I missed interacting with people.

* * *

Several more weeks passed by, and the only living soul I found was Bubba, a Pit Bull who lived in someone's house I was going through. He was almost dead from starvation and dehydration when I found him, so I fed him and took him home with me. We made good friends, I would carry doggy treats around in my pocket, so he would follow me around, hoping occasionally I'd give him a snack. He was real good at finding things too. I remember one morning I found him chewing on a hunk of meat and he had discarded a pretty ring. It looked just like my wife's wedding band. I ran out back to make sure the dog wasn't chewing on my wife's hand, but her grave was undisturbed. I might have made Bubba leave that meat alone, seeing as how it was a human's, but at that point I didn't care.

A couple months had passed since Erica and everyone else had died, and I decided I had to leave town. I had come to the conclusion that no one else in my city was alive, but driving through those familiar streets and sleeping in the bed I used to share with my wife haunted me. Sometimes I would hear my wife laughing around a corner, and I would sprint over to see if it was her, but it was just Bubba, panting in the shade of a tree. He was a great companion, but I needed a new, fresh beginning...and I needed to see if I could find any human contact. I was trying to decide where I would go when the man called again.

"Hello," I said, hoping that it wouldn't be the man who had taunted me several months back, but it was him.

"Hm hm hm," he cackled, "Why haven't you left that place yet? I told you all the answers you needed were in Chicago."

"Why Chicago?" I asked, "Who are you?"

But again, the phone disconnected, leaving me talking to the ring tone. But that was enough to convince me; I didn't know who he was or why he was tormenting me, but I had to figure him out. I was going to Chicago.

Luke had a big pick-up truck, the bed was large enough to hold a great deal of supplies and the cabin was roomy enough for Bubba and me, so I decided to take it. After I loaded up all the food, water, and gasoline I could haul in Luke's truck, Bubba and I left town. It was silly, but I locked the door to my house before I left. I really had hoped that I would see it again someday.

We drove all the way across Missouri and up Illinois, and found a lot of cars and we stopped to check on some of them, but their inhabitants were all dead. But some of the cars had things I thought I might need, or want, like money, clothes, that sort of thing. We even found a trailer with a Yamaha motorcycle on it, so I hitched it to the truck and took it with us.

The first two nights in Chicago were uneventful. We took over a small apartment on the outskirts of town and used it as a base of operations of sorts, and we searched several of the buildings around, looking for the answers that were supposedly in Chicago, but I didn't find any. Until the third day that is.

I had decided to move to a different part of the city, so me and Bubba packed everything up into the truck. He was a good dog; whenever I spoke he would always look me in the eye, like he was really listening and understanding what I said. After months of solitude, it was good to have someone to talk to.

We were driving down a street, I honestly don't remember which one, when I saw a wine bottle with a flaming rag stuffed in it's neck fall to the street. It erupted on contact, creating a massive fireball in front of Luke's truck. I slammed on the brakes, and Bubba flew off the seat and crashed to the floor under the dashboard.

"Sorry Bubba!" I said as he looked up at me, his eyes seemed to ask me what was wrong, which was a good question. I looked at the flames licking up from the pavement, then up at the building it had come from. About five stories up I saw a man with his head leaning out the window. I opened the door and started to get out to shout up at him, but before I got my foot all the way out, I heard a voice yell.

"Freeze! Don't move!"

I stopped where I was, my left leg dangling out of the car door and I held my hands up. I craned my head around and saw another man walking out of a door, a rifle leveled right at me. He slowly approached, and another armed man walked out behind him. I saw motion on the other side of the street and saw four more armed men advancing on the truck.

"Who are you?" the man in the window shouted down at me. I looked up at him, he had black hair and looked to be clean shaven, but he was so far away I couldn't really see any other features on him.

"I'm Jake Barrett," I yelled up at him, as a second thought I added, "I'm from Kansas."

"Why are you here?"

"Someone keeps calling me on the phone!" I replied, "He told me answers could be found in Chicago!"

I noticed several of the armed men looking at each other, each looked startled, then the man in the window looked at the man who had told me to freeze and nodded his head. He lowered his weapon a second before the other men lowered their's.

"Alright, let's go," he said as another man pulled the door open to the building. I stepped out and called for Bubba, and he hopped out behind me, and together we followed the men upstairs to the fifth floor.

He opened the door to an apartment and stood aside, letting me enter first. It was a pretty large apartment, I whistled at the size of it. A large-screen TV sat turned off against the wall to the right of the door, and a broad, maroon sofa was pushed up against the only window in the room, and several stacks of mattresses were lying around the room. Sitting on the sofa was the man with the black hair; seeing him closer I saw he had streaks of gray shooting through his temples and a fair amount of

wrinkles around his eyes. He had black rimmed glasses resting half way up his nose. He stood and walked across the room, extending his hand.

"Jake Barrett is it? Pleased to meet you," he said as I shook his hand, "I'm James Nicklaus."

I smiled as I relished the warmth of another human's hand in mine; I grabbed his wrist with my other hand and realized a tear was rolling down my cheek. I looked up at him and saw him smiling at me, and I chuckled as I let his hand go.

"Sorry, it's been a while since I've even seen a living person, let alone touched one."

James laughed, "Don't worry about it Jake." He turned and walked over to a closed door along the right wall, and he opened it up, "It's ok everyone," he called into the other room, "It's another survivor."

I smiled as more people poured out of the room; men, women and children of every age and color walked out, almost twenty in all. Immediately, the old feeling of claustrophobia came back, I always got it when I was in a small area with a lot of people, but this time I fought through the sudden fear. I was speechless.

"Jake, I want you to meet what we have dubbed 'The Survivors'," James said, "These people, and myself, have all been led here by a man on the phone saying answers were in Chicago."

I shook my head, and wiped the tears off my cheeks, "I'm sorry, I'm usually not this emotional. There was no one left in my town." Bubba barked, and I laughed and knelt next to him, scratching his ear, "Except for you Bubba."

"A doggie!" a small voice said and a little girl pushed through the crowd and ran over to Bubba, hugging him. I saw a petite brunette start to go grab her, but I stopped her.

"It's ok, Bubba's very friendly." I reassured her, and turned back to James, "Really? We all got those phone calls? Has anyone learned anything?"

For the first time since I met James I saw a shadow of regret cross his face. He shook his head and looked down.

"Not yet," he made a quiet, growling noise in the back of his throat, "I don't know why not. It can't be a hoax with all these people coming here."

I scratched my head, thinking as one of the men with the guns came up to us. He smiled at me, then looked at James.

"With Jake here, that brings the total to twenty-two," he said, "eleven males and eleven females."

"That's bizarre that there would be this kind of equality between us," James said, scratching his chin, "Very strange."

* * *

That night I sat on a mattress in the main room, my back against the red couch. I had asked if I could sleep by the window, and the man who had been sleeping there was gracious enough to let me have his mattress. I had my head leaning back against the arm of the sofa, a light breeze caressing the back of my neck as I watched that little girl playing with Bubba.

"I hope she's not bothering you," a woman said.

I looked up at her as she stopped in front of me. I smiled at her, she wasn't the prettiest woman I had seen, and didn't hold a candle to my Erica, but I hadn't seen a living woman in months.

"Oh, she's no bother. Bubba needs the exercise."

She giggled, "I'm Karen."

"I'm Jake."

"I know," she winked at me and this time I giggled. I slid over and asked her to sit down next to me, which she did, "So, Karen, is this little girl yours?"

"Oh yes," she smiled, I could see the pride in her eyes, "Come here Melinda, meet Jake."

Melinda walked over to me and said hi, and Bubba plopped down between me and Karen, resting his head on my knee. Melinda sat down cross-legged in front of Bubba, stroking his head.

"I like your dog, Jake," she said.

"I think he likes you too, Melinda," I said, smiling at Karen, "I'm glad he found a friend here, I think he was getting bored with me."

Melinda giggled, and Karen started petting the dog behind his ear. Bubba loved all the attention.

"How about you, Jake," Karen said, "Have you made any friends?"

I shrugged, then looked at her, "You tell me."

She smiled, "Were you married, Jake?"

I frowned and looked down at my lap, and noticed that I was unconsciously fidgeting with my wedding ring.

"Yes, I was."

She must have seen that I was still affected by Erica's death, and she took my hand.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

"It's ok," I looked up at her and forced a smile onto my face, "it's good to talk about these things."

She was about to say something, when suddenly a bright light started shining outside the window. I shielded my eyes and turned to look out; my jaw dropped. Descending down to the street was a triangular ship. It was radiating the bright white light that was shining through the window. As it neared the surface of the street, it extended landing gear and touched down.

"Holy shit," I said.

My exclamation caught the attention of everyone in the room, and they crowded around the window. I heard people gasp and start to whisper as a ramp lowered from the underbelly of the ship, and a soft blue glow emanated from inside.

"What is this?" I heard James whisper, and I looked up and saw him kneeling on the couch, his head hanging out the window like when he had stopped me.

"I don't know," I said, shaking my head, then I got up, "But I'll go find out."

"Wait? Why?" I stopped. Several people had asked the same questions at the same time. I turned back to them.

"Listen, they already know we are here, that's why they landed on our street," I turned and started walking to the door, "I'd rather go down to them and find out what they want than wait for them to come up to us."

I walked out and started heading down the stairs, I got to the first landing and looked up and saw James and Karen leading the people out of the apartment. I smiled for a moment, proud that in so short a time I had made friends with people who cared so deeply for me, but I killed the smile as I walked outside.

I walked past my truck which was parked where I had left it and marched to the edge of the craft. It looked bigger from this angle, and I realized that the corners were turned down, giving the ship a softer, flowing feel to it. Then I stopped in my tracks as I saw three small beings at the base of the ramp.

They were very small, maybe a little taller than Melinda, and wiry thin with gray skin and a bulbous head sitting atop narrow necks. They had big, almond shaped black eyes, and I laughed as I realized that all the alien stories were true, right down to the Grays. The alien in the middle smiled at me, or he pulled the corners of its small, slit-like mouth up. I watched in awe as the beings walked towards me. They moved very fluidly, yet slowly, as though they were afraid something would fall on them.

The one in the middle stopped in front of me, and looked up at me, its smile still on its noseless face.

"Greetings, Jake Barrett," the alien said.

I was shocked, *how can it speak English? How does it know my name?* I thought. I stood there, my mouth hanging open, not knowing what to say, when Bubba ran up through the crowd, barking at the alien. The aliens made a weird chuckling noise, and the one on the left picked Bubba up.

"Ah, an Earth creature called a 'dog'," the alien said, "I've always wanted to pet one."

"Well, Bubba's a good dog, you can pet him," I said. I laugh about it today, thinking back at my first words to aliens. Luckily I followed that gem up with something more appropriate, "How do you know my name?"

"We know all about those who survived the plague," the middle alien said, "We've been studying your planet for thousands of years, and yes, that's how we can speak your language."

James stepped up beside me, "What plague?"

"Why, the one that killed your people," the alien jerked his head back, and the brow over his eyes wrinkled, "We attempted to stop the Ichthyrians from unleashing the bomb in orbit around your world, but we failed."

"The who?" I asked, looking around, I saw the other aliens looking down at the ground.

"We are terribly sorry," one said.

"Who's been callin' us?" someone in the crowd shouted.

"That is one of the Ichthyrians," another alien said, "You will notice that everyone except for you died on one night. The night the bomb was detonated above your world. After that night we and the Ichthyrians declared a truce, our war had never devastated a planet like yours before. An Ichthyrian volunteered to arrange to get all the survivors of the United States in Chicago so we could pick them up."

"Wait? Pick us up?" I asked. I didn't like where this was going, "We don't wanna go."

"You have to go," you were lucky that you weren't killed that night," the middle alien spoke, "But the plague the bomb released is slowly poisoning your atmosphere. You must all leave, or you will all die."

There were numerous groans as the people started crying, realizing they were facing the most difficult ultimatum in their lifetimes. As for me, the choice was clear. I hadn't committed suicide at home, and I wasn't going to stand around and let the atmosphere kill me either. I was the first to make my decision to leave.

* * *

Many years later we returned to orbit over Earth. I stood at a portal with Karen, who was now my wife, by my side and watched our former home world revolve in space. When we had left, it was a blue and green ball with white clouds; now that we had returned, it was brown and black and looked as poisonous as the atmosphere was supposed to be. We have never returned since then.

Squirrel and Bear

A Fable for Adult Ears

"Ahhh the sun is so bright," Bear said as he walked into the light. He couldn't remember what happened last night.

"I ate some apples and then... I don't know. What the fuck!?! The forest is covered with snow!"

While other bears were asleep, tucked neatly in bed, Bear sat outside holding his head, with a pain that could easily leave a goat dead.

"What the hell? There's not supposed to be snow. Last night I thought there was still two weeks to go."

"I see you're up my friend big and brown. How was your little excursion in town?"

Bear looked up and saw his little friend Squirrel, with eyes black, shiny, and round like pearls. Her furry face was full of mischief and glee as she jumped and chattered from tree to tree.

"What happened to me my tiny friend and how did I wind up here in the end?"

"You don't remember a thing?" Squirrel did sing, as she jumped to the ground without making a sound. "Now this is a story I have to tell. Sit and listen to me about your night from hell."

"You ate some old apples that had been on the ground, then started giggling and rolling around. It wasn't that late and you couldn't walk straight. And your words were all slurred and your vision was blurred."

Squirrel paused to eat a nut she had gaffled, while Bear sat in front of his cave simply baffled. He remembered the apples but nothing more and he was wondering if Squirrel was a lying whore. Trying to trick him and telling him lies, he was going to get past her little disguise.

"So what else did I do on this night in question, or is it now out of your recollection?" Bear thought he was being clever and neat, but Squirrel went on without missing a beat.

"You waddled into town with no fear or dread, and I followed to see the train wreck ahead. You should've been there, you funny old bear. Oh wait you were. Too bad it's a blur."

"On with it!" said Bear with a growl. *I don't believe her*, he thought with a scowl. *Something else happened. I'll bet she's to blame. If this is her fun, boy is she lame.*

"And then once you managed to get into town, you began acting stupid and messing around. You raided some trash cans, broke into cars, and got your head stuck in an old pickle jar. It was quite a scene I have to admit, and once you got started you didn't quit. You kept bugging the town folk and scaring them shitless. What a grand time I was able to witness."

"I don't believe you this story is bunk. I don't think that I was really that drunk." Bear was now angry at his little friend, but he still wanted to hear how her fairytale would end. So he shut his big mouth and lent Squirrel his ear, though he did not believe a word he did hear.

"Those apples fermented you dumb fucking Bear, you were falling all over you're lucky I care." With that Squirrel leapt in the air and retrieved a nut from her hollowed out lair.

"To continue the story," Squirrel said with a yawn, "Oh my, this story is much much too long. I'm tired it's time for my winter nap, I'll tell you the rest when spring comes back."

"Oh no little Squirrel I must know it now, or I'll eat you right here, you'll be my winter chow."

"When you put it that way," said Squirrel with a grin. "I'll continue the story until it is fin."

"A farmer came out with a gun to shoot, but you were too funny you big galoot. So he decided to call up the zoo instead, to have them come out and escort you to bed. But you were still drunk and wanted to play. They found you rolling around in some hay. You saw them and took off in a sprint, but you tripped over tools and started to limp. You rounded a corner and hit some trash cans. Boy I'll bet that sure ruined your plans. You tried to keep running but you were too drunk. You fell over and landed hard with a thunk."

Squirrel laughed at the Bear but he wasn't amused. He felt his whole body and it was all bruised. Bear sulked while Squirrel went on. He felt his patience was almost gone.

"You jumped in a barrel but you were too large, and you fell over backwards and then tried to charge. But the barrel was still lodged on your head, and you flipped over forwards. You should have been dead. But you found your way out and ran towards the trees, but you hit a wooden box all full of bees. Then you battled the bees and swatted them back and the humans thought you were on the attack. So they pulled out their dart guns and shot your ass; you fell over sideways. Ha ha, what a gas!

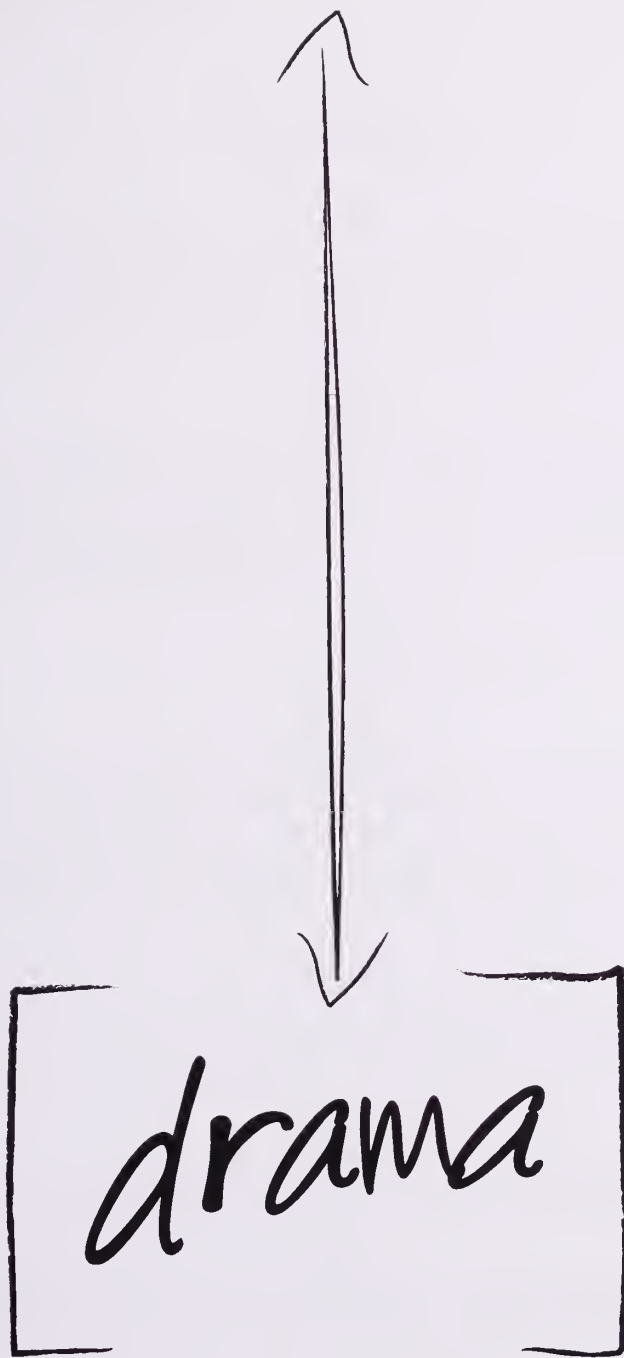
You're lucky that they didn't shoot you dead. They packed you in a truck and brought you here instead."

Squirrel had taken too much delight in telling the story of Bear's horrible night. She laughed and giggled as she rolled around, but before she knew it she was pinned to the ground.

"Now listen here you little twit. That story was a piece of shit and I didn't believe any of it. So now I'm going to make you quit."

He ate her like a tatter tot, crawled into his cave and found a spot. He slept silently without a dream until the familiar sounds of spring.

Squirrel sat in Bear's tummy and pondered her fate, she thought of a lesson but it was too late. "The moral of this story, boys and girls, is don't fuck with a Bear if you're a Squirrel.



The Vagrant

Act I, Scene 1

[It is an early morning at the beginning of the week. The block is almost deserted except for the few leaving for work. It is a cool windy day. As the wind whips through, Vagrant paws at his jacket. The people are walking by quickly, leaving Vagrant talking to himself sitting on the bottom left corner of Seraphina's stoop.]

Vagrant

I love the morning wind, boy. I love the morning wind. You never know what's coming in the morning wind. Or what's leaving. Jo Jo it's going to be a beautiful day today. A beautiful day. Dollar for Jo! Anybody got a dollar for Jo. My names Jo and I need a dollar. You need my help up those stairs ma'am. No, ok. Sir can I help you with...no, ok. Sir can I...No...ok. Yeah I love the morning wind.

[Bus pulls up. The driver gets out and squats close to Jo.]

Driver

What for? You ain't got nothing to be happy about do ya? I see you over here all the time with nothing. I don't mean to be rude or nothing but I been really wanting to say you're "asking for a dollar!?" Ask for a job. Ha ha. Don't nobody want your help, and they sure don't need it. How's it going this morning, man? I see you over here talking to yourself. You finally snapped.

Vagrant

How's it going this morning Mr. Driver? You don't know anything about me. Yet you judge me. You must have run out of skirts to chase. Or is it plaid skirts you're after? What, too many business skirts out here?

Driver

Yeah, there you go with that talk again. What, have you been to school or something?

Vagrant

Like you? Naw, you went to the school of poison. I remember when you first got here. You spoke all proper. Clean even. You aren't that clean though are you? You probably

drip dirt on everyone you encounter. What happened? Slummin'. Driving these busses... You only drive one bus now though. Ha.

Driver

[The smile leaves his face.] Yeah, one bus. How long you been sitting on this stoop old man?

Vagrant

Just under ten years. I'm not all that old either. You keep being you and you might get to find that out personally.

Driver

That's a long time to be nothing. All that time...and talking to the dry old crossing guard. She believe the things you said about me? Or did she believe the things I said about you?

Vagrant

I got the word out there Judaeus Higgins. Yeah I know who you are. Born August 30, 1969 in the hills of L.A. Now who's nothing?

Driver

So what, are you like the lazy guru, the vicious vagrant, that saving slob? Ha ha. I wonder about you. You think you can save somebody Jo? I don't know anything about you. But I know the most important thing. You ain't nobody. I come from places you ain't never been. And yeah, slummin'. I'm doing that. That you got right. I don't intend on you being a problem for me. You are nobody. I've had bigger trouble from children.

Vagrant

I bet you have. I don't know if you've noticed but I see you. I see straight through you. I've seen you before. I've seen your type. You're money's whore. Nothing you do is genuine. Nothing you do is righteous. You are nothing. You walk around here like anyone would notice if you missed a day of work. Do you think they'd miss you for a week? What about a year? You may as well have never arrived, because other than messing and muddying everything, you have nothing. I may be dirty but you're nasty and I know it. What did you start as? Some borderline superintendent, dean, teacher--

Driver

All right that's enough from you bum. I'm wasting my time--

Vagrant

Yeah, teacher. You seem like the type with lots of friends. Maybe even at one time intelligence. Young. Attractive. Inconspicuous. Just like mass murderers. You think someone saw you coming?

Driver

You're senile old man. You put things together like a candy-cop detective. I got more skill in my dick than in your whole carcass.

Vagrant

I hit a nerve, Judaous. Something wrong? This bum that nobody hears talk too loud?

Driver

I ain't got any nerves.

Vagrant

Way it looks you don't have a soul either.

Driver

What is it that you used to do? I don't want you blabbing everywhere about me. There's so much to Judaous Higgins you couldn't believe it from a file. If you knew me you'd understand. Maybe you were human once.

Vagrant

Yeah, once. I guess that's something we have in common.

Driver

You talk like you've been looking me up. Maybe I should do the same to you?

Vagrant

You're just now wondering how I know you. What do you think I know? No one would ever think a little rich boy could be read and soon ran by the bum.

Driver

You haven't run anything but your mouth and you really are crazy if you think you will ever run me. You are nobody, remember!

Vagrant

Then why are you standing so long talking to nobody? It sounds like you lost that slum accent for a minute there, huh?

Driver

What you doing here anyway?

Vagrant

I live here.

Driver

This isn't here, it's out here. You don't need to be sittin' under this stoop. Why don't you move on?

Vagrant

What do you do when you pull the bus into the corner under the trees?

Driver

Is Seraphina dressed and ready yet? I told her to be ready for this bus.

Vagrant

Maybe it's not the bus she's not ready for. What do you do when you pull the bus into the corner under the trees?

Driver

What trees?

Vagrant

Why do you come and get Seraphina so early?

Driver

Her mom asked me. What, you mad 'cause you can't drive her? Look, I told you I don't have time for talking to nobodies. I only got down to talk to you 'cause you talked to the crossing guard. You stop spreading rumors about me old man.

[He points closely to Jo's face with a stiff finger. Jo grabs it and begins to squeeze.
Seraphina comes out of the stoop door.]

Seraphina

I'm ready, Mr. Higgins. [Driver snatches finger.]

Driver

Don't ever put your hands on me again old man. Don't be late again Serry.

Seraphina

I won't.

[Driver gets on bus and holds the handle to close the door.]

Driver

You better not get to know me so well Jo Jo. I don't have to be such a nice guy.

[He closes door and drives the bus away.]

End of Act I, Scene 1

Act I, Scene 2

[Seraphina and Vagrant sit on her stoop sharing sandwiches as she waits for the bus. Vagrant is dressed in rags and continues to adjust his clothing. They share a blanket. The people walking by ignore them both.]

Seraphina

Can you hear me chewing, Jo?

Vagrant

Naw, even if I could I would just want your sandwich too. Besides it doesn't seem like you open your mouth enough to make any noises, chewin' or laughin' or nothin'.

Young girls shouldn't go without laughing! I want to tell you how much I appreciate these sandwiches. Some days they're the only food I eat.

Seraphina

Sometimes you're the only friend I meet. Jo, do you like mayonnaise on your sandwiches?

Vagrant

Mayonnaise, mustard, capers, cow dung... just about any condiment'll work for me.

Seraphina

Ha ha. Excrement makes things grow, Jo. Sometimes I feel like that should go for life too. It always feels like someone's sitting on us. Why would we feel like shit?

Vagrant

Look at me. Look at these people looking at me. They pass by. I've tried so hard for so long, I'm tired. Never before, but I feel unclean, like people say all day. This morning a man threw water on me Serry.

Seraphina

Water's for saving, Jo.

Vagrant

It hasn't saved me. Can I ask you a question Seraphina?

Seraphina

You can do lots of things, Mr. Joseph Horowitz.

Vagrant

What does your family do?

Seraphina

Oh, that's um...my brother works hard. He leaves home pretty early every morning. That's why I end up sitting here with you. My dad deals with people all day. He is very

busy. We see him all the time though. They are both very powerful. They take great care of me.

Vagrant

Even on the bus? I see you everyday. You're no happier one day to the other, like me. You shouldn't feel old or tired like me. How old are you Seraphina?

[He plays with her hair.]

Seraphina

Fifteen.

Vagrant

Yet you sound like forty-three. Do you ever get scared doing so much alone?

[Bus drives up to corner.]

Driver

Hey there Frick and Fuck. Ha ha. Sometimes it's hard to tell who's which.

Vagrant

Are you supposed to talk to kids this way? You better stop talking to me this way.

Driver

Or what? Besides, Miss Sera-fine here ain't necessarily a kid, is she? We all see those boys and her. Don't we? I have been driving Miss Sera-fine here for two years and ain't never seen adult one. She's as good as grown. Aren't you Seraphina? Heck sometimes I even got to pay for her lunch. And here she's sharing hers.

Seraphina

I don't want your money, Mr. Higgins.

Driver

But you take it.

Vagrant

Yeah, but she ain't grown.

Driver

Why you care anyway? Here's some change. [He throws it at him viciously.] Take a bath. You and Seraphina just afraid of losing your free lunch. She can waste her time talking to nobody, but I can't. Get on the bus Seraphina.

[Seraphina gets on the bus.]

End of Act I, Scene 2

Act I, Scene 3

[It is late afternoon in the middle of the week. The block is throbbing everywhere but in front of Vagrant's stoop. He is clearly being avoided, and he looks dirtier than usual. It is a cool dark day. The people are walking quickly, leaving Vagrant mumbling to himself.]

Vagrant

Hump day. It's supposed to get easier from here. Supposed to be going down the hill. The toughest days are over. I've seen these days get longer and longer. They just seem to get harder. Seraphina is late again today.

[Female police officer walks in front of him and begins to give tickets to parked cars.]

I was hoping you'd come by here today. You're just in time. You know I knew you were just kidding the other day when you spoke to Mr. Higgins. He came up to me all proud talking about who would you believe. You told him everything we talked about too, huh? He seemed pretty sparked whatever you told him. I appreciate your help. I knew you'd come back. You know it really does take a village. Did you give him a warning?

Officer

Not you again. It takes a village to do what? Warning for what?

Vagrant

You know, what we talked about. About Seraphina?

Officer

Who?

Vagrant

The little girl on the bus, Seraphina. She still hasn't gotten here. You know she's late again today. You do remember us talking about her, don't you?

Officer

Oh, now I remember.

Vagrant

Yes, you talked to him?

Officer

How often are you on this stoop?

Vagrant

Everyday.

Officer

How long have you been here?

Vagrant

Just under ten years. Why?

Officer

What's your name?

Vagrant

Jo Herowitz. 32nd Ward, NE Battalion, Los Angeles Fire Fighters Unit, 1985 to '93.

Officer

Well Jo, 32nd Battalion, LA Ward, how old are you?

Vagrant

[He gives huge sigh.] Thirty-second Ward, NE Battalion, Los Angeles Fire Unit. Do you remember the con-ver-sa-tion or not?

Officer

I remember about a week and a half ago you were ranting and raving about some driver who wouldn't give you any money, and then all of a sudden you wanted to prosecute him for molesting a young girl.

Vagrant

Not quite like that. But in any case.

Officer

How long have you known this girl? You seem pretty interested in her.

Vagrant

Are you kidding me? Do you even know the little girl I'm talking about?

Officer

Yeah, and she ain't that little, is she? You might not know this but I don't live far from here. I've been on this beat for two years and ain't ever heard a complaint about Mr. Higgins. I have heard complaints about little Miss Seraphina though. This wouldn't be the first accusation of her and a man.

Vagrant

Oh my God, you even know his name?! What have you heard about Seraphina?

Officer

Enough not to give this any more attention. I spoke to Mr. Higgins, and if little Miss Seraphina ever comes home I'll be talkin' to her too.

Vagrant

They're usually somewhere near here. Like right around the corner. Just keep an eye out. That's all I'm asking.

Officer

Yeah, an eye. Do these people mind you sitting on their stoop?

Vagrant

I haven't had a complaint to date.

Officer

I'm sure the neighborhood doesn't like it. When I get back here I will want you to have moved on or you'll be getting arrested. I mean it.

[Officer exits. Vagrant is alone on stage.
People are passing by again as he begins talking to himself.]

Vagrant

She wants me gone or I'll be arrested? [Tussles hair.] Oh, Seraphina. Who will look after you? I hear home is love. What happens to those of us without it? I gotta do something. Besides, jail for homeless is insane asylum. What do I do?

[He begins walking as if looking for something. He turns the corner and sees the bus in front of the alley under a large collection of trees. He runs back to the stoop, collects a back pack, comes back to the bus and begins washing the windows. He sees Seraphina on the bus and the driver quickly adjusting his pants. Seraphina puts one finger to her lips directed at Vagrant. Driver opens door.]

Driver

I told you didn't I? Get away from the bus. Move Jo. You're gonna get it this time. [Vagrant steps onto bus.] What do you want?

[Seraphina reaches into her pocket and walks towards head of the bus. As she hands him change he pushes the driver and grabs Seraphina. They run past the policewoman and she begins to yell for them to stop. The lights go down, and there is much commotion and noise.]

End of Act I, Scene 3

Act I, Scene 4

[Seraphina and Vagrant run to the stoop. As Seraphina unlocks the door to her apartment, Vagrant holds close guard to the stoop, making sure they aren't still being followed. There are sirens in the background. When he looks to check if she is all right, he is terrified to see that she is gone. He walks into the apartment and is stunned to see that it is completely empty, and Seraphina is not there either. Perplexed and scared, he runs around the corner to see the bus, but a different driver is sitting behind the wheel. He looks down the street to see a different policewoman guarding the crosswalk. Stunned and shaky, he walks back to the apartment and goes in. Next to the sink, he finds a key and an envelope with his name on it. It is full of cash and contains a note.]

Vagrant

[Reading from the note.] From your angel.

The End

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